THE WHITE HOUSE

M. E. BRADDON

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The White House

BY

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"Lady Audley's Secret,"
&c., &c.

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THE WHITE HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

"Sick, sick, sick, sick!"

That was what the clock said.

"Sick of the world I live in; sick of life and all that it holds; sick to death!"

That was what the rain said, the wind-driven summer rain, lashing the long line of windows in sudden angry rushes, beating it out against the windows in that long room which had been devised to be unlike everybody else's rooms, not quite a picture-gallery and not quite a drawing-room,—a store-house for things of exceeding value, rare flowers that perish in a day, rarer furniture that had belonged to a martyr queen, or had been sold at an amazing price on that pretence.

The beating of the rain upon glass grew louder, and told the story of life-weariness with brutal emphasis.

"Sick, sick to death!"

And then the clock changed its note and ticked, "death, death, death, death!"

Claudia walked slowly to and fro, sometimes without stopping in her slow march backwards and forwards, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but straight before her, with vacant eyes that saw nothing; sometimes coming suddenly to a standstill in front of one of the windows.

The prospect was not cheerful, though it was an item that had counted for a good many thousands in the price that Ralph Rayner had paid for his house,

thirteen years before that hopeless July afternoon. Those dripping trees, the broad expanse of sodden grass, were things upon which only the privileged few had the right to look from their windows.

The very scum of the earth might come from their miserable homes to look at Hyde Park, might sprawl face downwards upon the sward, in the lethargic day-sleep of victims who had been policeman-driven from pillar to post all night ; but the view of those verdant spaces from a window in Park Lane was reserved for the inordinately rich, among whom might be numbered Ralph Rayner.

His only daughter paced the long gallery in a depth of despondency as black as the mourning gown that trailed upon the parquet floor, with a swish of silk below, and the dulness of woollen stuff above. Her mourning was French mourning, not expressed in crape, but in the dense blackness of a special kind of cloth, a fabric that suggested the quintessence of grief. She had worn this dismal raiment for a long time, first for her brother, whom she had loved passionately, but with a love not exempt from a touch of scorn. He had seemed to her a weakling, and he had disapproved of her way of life, and of her mother's, which was worse. Up to a certain crisis in his life they had been bosom friends, but there came a time when their roads parted. The brother had strange views of life and duty, and a beautiful young woman, essentially worldly and modern, could hardly be expected to get on well with a young man whose master and guide was Saint Francis of Assisi.

Her mother's death had been a long agony, the martyrdom of the cancer patient, surprised in the midst of her light trivial day by the subtle, mysterious, incurable disease that mocks its victim with flashes of hope while it kills by inches. Her brother's death had been swift and tragic—a tragedy whose far-reaching influence she had still to learn.

She was five-and-twenty, and she felt as if she were five-and-sixty. The disgust of life had come upon her at an age when other women are keen and ardent in the carnival of pleasure—London seasons and

country-house gatherings, German spas, Italian lakes, Egypt, Algiers, Ceylon, India, New York, South Africa.

Perhaps she had never cared much for the pleasures of which other women know not satiety. At any rate she wearied of them sooner than those other women. She had been reared in a golden atmosphere, and had sometimes talked of herself contemptuously as a modern Miss Kilmansegg. If her cradle had not been actually made of gold the influence of her father's millions had pervaded her life. She had been steeped in money. Nothing that gold could buy had been denied to her. And for the result she was tired of her life, and the clock said, "Sick, sick, sick!" or "death, death, death!" and every shriek of the south-west wind sounded like the screech of a banshee.

With all her father's wealth, and with beauty of no common order, she had not been a social success. Of course, she had had offers. Coronets had been laid at her feet, but they had been shabby coronets, with a good deal of the gilding worn off, damaged coronets, battered and disreputable as a drunkard's hat when it appears before the magistrate after a night in a police cell. The great matches had gone elsewhere. Her beauty was singular; and the golden youth of her day were repelled, rather than attracted, by the splendour of a face and figure that suggested Semiramis or Cleopatra rather than Juliet. The men who admired her most were most afraid of her; for she had a tongue that could wound, and girl friends had talked of a temper. She was rumoured, also, to possess a mind, to be "no end of clever," to have battened upon the works of agnostics and pessimists in half a dozen languages. She was as terrible to the ordinary feather-headed girl as the Princess Ida would have been; and the feather-headed contingent did not bridle their tongues when they talked of her. Her pearl chain and necklace had cost twenty thousand pounds, and she was impossible. Those were the two facts that were often emphasised when Miss Rayner's name came on the tapis.

So long as she had her mother to please she had

been a prominent person in society, wherever the best, that is to say, the richest people were gathered. Lady Magdalen Rayner had been a star in the feather-headed brigade, sumptuous, sensuous, lavish, rejoicing in all things trivial and new.

From the day her millionaire husband took her to his house in Hill Street, proud of her beauty, but still more proud of her birth, to the hour when she gave up her hard fight against a mortal malady, she had been a leader; and for the last five years of her life in the world she loved, her daughter had gone everywhere with her, and had been her faithful aid in the strenuous career of a woman who leads and rules other women.

Mother and daughter were curiously alike in feature and colouring, in figure and carriage. But for that difference of mind against no mind, the likeness would have been perfect. With Lady Magdalen, charm and manner made up for the want of brain-power; and with her daughter brain-power went to the spoiling of beauty and manner.

Until the hour when her mother gave up the struggle against the inevitable, and surrendered to doctors and nurses and the consciousness that her good days were done, Claudia had endured the monotony of pleasures which recurred with the revolving year, in a wearisome succession, and which had lost all zest for her when they lost the charm of novelty. "*Connu, Connu,*" was the word that sounded in her brain with reiteration as the years went by, and the same beaten track had to be trodden again and again. Her father loved splendour, and display, and notoriety, which he took for fame. Her mother loved admiration, to be always first, a predominance that could mostly be bought with money; especially when the dispenser of gold was handsome, bounteous, and conciliatory, an attractive personality, the ideal woman of forty, with beauty that promised never to fade. It was natural, therefore, that for Ralph Rayner and his family the beaten track meant the crowded highway where royalty led the procession, and fashion, rank, wealth, greed, aspiration, and vulgarity followed.

Home life for such a household was impossible. The place in Derbyshire, the shooting-box on the Scotch moor, the house in Park Lane, were homes that knew not solitude. At the German Spa or by the Italian lake Lady Magdalen's parties were sometimes the largest, and always the most expensive, among the season's gaieties. Her summer ball, her boy and girl dance following a sumptuous dinner, were things of wonder; and lest London should not suffice for the entertainment of people she did not care a straw about, there was generally somebody's ideal place up the river, to be rented in June and July, for Saturday to Monday parties of people who thought themselves famous, and who wanted to see each other.

The passing bell of all her joys and hopes, of all the things that had made the sum of her futile life, struck its ghostly note in Lady Magdalen's ear more than a year before the deep slow tolling of that actual bell, in the church tower that her husband had built, sounded across park and gardens on the stormy autumn afternoon of her funeral.

From scenes as brilliant as the historic ball on the eve of battle she had vanished to a life of seclusion and restraint; and from a leader in the race of pleasure she became a patient sufferer, cherished with devoted care by her only daughter. Her only son had other duties, being newly married to a wife he was supposed to worship, and came only at intervals to sit beside his mother's sofa, and try to say hopeful words, while the speaker and the listener both knew that on this earth there was no more hope. And before the slow progress of disease brought a merciful release from pain there came the cruel shock of her son's untimely death —an accident, the careless handling of a too delicate weapon, a moment's inattention, and a young life blotted out. That was a grief beyond the power of consolation, and the remnant of Lady Magdalen's life was one long regret.

The slow year of pain and sorrow had been a bitter trial for Claudia, who had loved her mother with the one strong passion of her soul. No more romantic love had ever come between them. There had been

passing fancies, perhaps, the inevitable fancies of girlhood, but no fancy had ever ripened into love; and so far as man's love went Claudia was heart-whole at five-and-twenty. Heart-whole, and with a scornful distaste for the men she knew, whose ways of thinking and living she held in absolute contempt.

And in the midst of the slow tragedy of her mother's death, the long sad year in which, sitting beside the living sufferer, hand clasped in hand, she had foreshadowed her sorrow for the dead, there had come the more terrible tragedy of her brother's sudden and mysterious end.

"Mysterious," was society's word for the catastrophe. Killed by a pistol shot in his own dressing-room, a careless handling of a last new toy, looking down the barrel of a recently-bought revolver.

"Death by misadventure," was the verdict at the inquest. "Very mysterious," was the verdict of society, with certain shrugs and head-shakings. Society had reason to believe that the young man had always been eccentric; and that he ought never to have been allowed to marry that lovely, but rather foolish young thing, Sir Henry Mulliner's daughter.

He had died within the year of his marriage, leaving a childless widow of nineteen. He was a young man of great hopes, who might have done wonders at the University, where the sons of millionaires are hardly expected to excel in anything but expenditure and athletics. His wife was charming; he was the heir to a stupendous fortune; he was going into Parliament at the first opportunity. His father had given him an income that the successor to a dukedom need not have despised, with the freehold of one of the prettiest small houses in Mayfair; and in the midst of it all he must needs look down the barrel of his revolver, and break his young wife's heart.

Mother and brother had vanished into the night, the unfathomable, the unknowable, the unthinkable; and Claudia had only her father, who had never cared for her, and a herd of relations on the paternal and maternal side for whom she had never cared.

One of the herd was being driven round the carriage-

sweep in a Coupé Company's brougham while Claudia paced the long room that was not quite the kind of room that anybody would care to live in, rather a repository for Mortlake tapestries, early Italian pictures, old boule cabinets, Empire tables, a monumental clock, spacious armchairs, and colossal sofas.

Mr. Rayner had been crowded out of his house in Hill Street by the accumulation of his art-treasures.

"I wonder how long we are going to live in a bric-à-brac shop!" Lady Magdalen said more than once before the house in Park Lane was found—the famous White House, one of the largest houses along that aristocratic frontage, and with room and verge enough for improvements and additions.

"Now," said Lady Magdalen, "I can ask people to visit me," with an air that implied that the house in Hill Street had been a hermitage. "There was no room for us *and* the furniture," she said, "*one* had to go."

Mr. Rayner preened his plumes and expanded, revelling in his spacious splendour.

He was a man who believed in himself. Everything that he did, everything that he possessed, was glorious in his own eyes; and that is the kind of man, given the maximum of worldly means, that the world will accept and bow down to. London society worshipped him as the Israelites worshipped Baal; a splendid god, diffusing gold.

He was a large man, tall and stalwart, a man who had never known illness, and hardly realised that he was mortal. He had a fine head, with crisp light-brown hair,—which the censorious called red—commanding eyes, strong features, and a florid complexion. He dominated over the ruck of men in any assembly, a potent man, hitting straight wherever he wanted to hit, knowing what he wanted, and determined to get it.

He had been something less than a millionaire when he asked Magdalen Safford to marry him, but he had told her father, Lord Altrincham, that he meant to be incrdinately rich; and something in the man

had carried conviction, so that he was taken at his own price.

He was an inventor as well as a manufacturer, and the improvements and inventions that he had patented —nuts, bolts, rivets, screws, shackles, hooks, and piston-rods, simple-seeming things to the uninitiated—had made a revolution in more than one branch of the iron-world. The town in the West Riding where his works were situated was dominated by him as Egypt by the Pharaohs. His workshops, his chimneys, his furnaces, gasometers, and power-houses, had expanded and amplified until they had swallowed up all other works, all lesser chimneys bowing down before his fire-towers, and becoming his as time went on, prosperity seeming possible only when he was master.

His workmen's cottages, and club, and free library, and hospital, and dispensary, and co-operative stores, and baths, and convalescent homes, and orphanages, and people's park, had spread over the soil, until the town of Skepton and its rural suburbs were his, and the name of the town was a synonym for his name.

Such simple things were those inventions that brought him his colossal income! Simple things, but desperately needed all the world over, exported in millions, filling a hundred ships; wanted in every nook and corner of the earth where civilised man existed.

He had not begun his career with the traditional half-crown, but had started comfortably as the elder son of a prosperous father. He had spent his boyhood at a good middle-class public school, and had gone into his father's factory at eighteen years of age, well taught, well grown, a fine specimen of middle-class youth, with the hard muscle and fine fibre of the sons of the North, a young athlete, keen of wit and iron of frame, full of the joy of living.

He took to the "works" as a musical genius takes to his fiddle. The steel-making plant, the hydraulic forging presses were to him living things. No detail of the process of manufacture, from the pig to the finished rod or rail, escaped his ken. His father

declared that he was a born mechanician; and he had not been about the works two years before his inventive faculty came into play, and his improving hand was in action.

To his father, who had been contented to let old things be old things, and to jog along the beaten track, well satisfied when the year's trade showed no decline, the son seemed a Napoleon. He trembled at the youth's audacity; he bowed down before his talent.

"You are either going to ruin me or make me a millionaire," he said, in some doubt of an invention that necessitated an immense outlay for new machinery.

"I swear it shan't be ruin," said Ralph. "Ten years hence it won't be 'Best Yorkshire Iron' that folks will order, it will be 'Skepton'—just that and no more."

His confidence was justified by the result.

His father lived to see his trade-income increased by ten-fold, and new chimneys shooting up into the smoke-veiled sky like Lombardy poplars, and seeming to grow as easily. He lived to see his son married to Lord Altrincham's daughter, with a house in Mayfair, and a place in Derbyshire.

"I was always ambitious, Ralph," said the proud father.

"Not you! Your wisdom was to sit still. You didn't know that there's only one motto for a business man in our modern world."

"What's that?"

"The policeman's word to the loafer, 'Move on.'"

CHAPTER II.

THE butler announced, "Miss Pearl Rayner."

Claudia stopped suddenly in her roaming up and down, clasped her hands and clenched her teeth, with a movement of despair; then drew herself up to the fullest measure of that commanding height which was one of her awe-inspiring attributes, and advanced to meet her cousin. The visitor was tall, though not so tall as Claudia, a well-grown girl, in whose figure strength was a characteristic, a fair-complexioned and fair-haired girl, fair in this case meaning red, a girl whose white and red constituted a certain beauty.

She was dressed in pale grey touched with black, and her large hat and ostrich plumes would have been funereal enough for Hamlet. This was her second mourning for the aunt with whom she had never been intimate, and the cousin whose tragical fate had convulsed the family.

"How kind of you to call," Claudia said, with a languid slowness that made a civil speech sound uncivil.

"I hope you don't mind. Mother told me you had answered her letter so dolefully. You said you did not want to see people for ages. But we are not people in that sense; your cousins, your nearest relations."

"Oh, please don't apologise. If you are fond of gloom—I think North-country people have a *culte* for funerals—it was quite right of you to come."

"We are leaving Norfolk Square to-morrow. Father has taken a house at Ryde—big enough to

hold all of us—and Ruby's *fiancé*. You know she is engaged."

"Again?"

"I hope you don't think she was wrong in breaking off that other engagement."

"No; her mistake was in getting herself engaged to such a man."

"He seemed almost perfect."

"In Skepton perhaps. He was terrible in London. If Ruby meant to marry him she ought never to have seen him out of his native element."

"You might be a little more indulgent to poor old Skepton, as the source of your father's wealth."

"I don't care a straw for my father's wealth. It hasn't made us happy."

"Oh, but really, Claudia, you had such a splendid time. Your name was hardly ever out of the society papers. There never was a more brilliant existence than yours while Aunt Magdalen——"

"While my mother was with me I lived the life she liked—but I had long left off caring for the things she liked."

"Oh, you fancy that now, perhaps; but you were gay enough while you were in the whirlpool."

"It wouldn't have done to be lugubrious. I kept my long face for the day of sorrow. Well, I hope you will all enjoy Ryde."

"Father is going to hire a yacht, after Cowes regatta, just a hundred-ton yawl, that we can mess about in, between the island and Dartmouth. And, Claudia, I have something to ask you—something we all want—only mother was afraid to come to you, after your letter—I'm the cheekiest of the family, don't you know, so they sent me. We all want you to come and stay with us for August. We feel sure it would do you good."

"Oh, my God! Do me good!"

"To be among young people—not to be allowed to shut yourself up alone and mope."

"My dear Pearl, it would be intolerable, a slow agony that would drive me mad. As for moping and solitude, there is no other thing possible for me."

"But Aunt Magdalen has been dead nearly a year," murmured Pearl. "Is it to be always the same?"

"Yes, it is to be always the same. I can foresee no change in my life. If I were a pious person I would enter a sisterhood—an Anglican la Trappe. I would go where no one would speak to me except to tell me that I must die."

"Claudia! it is too dreadful," said her cousin, looking despairingly at those dry haggard eyes.

What could one do for a girl who could say such things without a tear, without the faintest inclination to throw her arms round a compassionate cousin's neck, or even to be kissed by her? a girl who seemed to dwell apart in a stony region of her own, beyond the reach of sympathy.

"It is quite a sweet house," Pearl said feebly, "a low rambling old-fashioned house, a little way out of Ryde, and in lovely grounds that slope down to the sea. And if you don't care for yachting you should never be asked to go. And you should have your own sitting-room, where no one should intrude upon you."

"Oh, you are a good girl, and you mean to be kind, but you can't understand. Nobody can understand. It isn't grief; it is something worse. It is disgust! Everything in this world has become hateful. My father and I have not talked to each other like blood relations for months. He keeps out of my way, and I keep out of his way. He is at Skepton just now—or I should not be in this room where he comes prowling sometimes to look at his treasures."

"I'm afraid he is very unhappy."

"Life is blacker for him than for me. He was very fond of my mother, but he hardly seemed to grieve for her death. Michael's fatal accident had frozen his heart. He loved his son ten times more than I loved my brother."

"But you and Aunt Magdalen were like twin sisters."

"We could hardly have been nearer if there had been a ligature uniting us. When she died I died;

only I have to stop above ground till I'm ready for the undertaker."

"It's all very horrible," sighed Pearl.

The family scheme for drawing Claudia out of herself, by a month in the sun and wind of the sea coast, had failed dismally. Pearl had relied upon her powers of persuasion. She had told her people that the time had come when barriers must be burst, and when cousinly feeling must be brought to bear upon Claudia, who had never been cousinly in her treatment of Mathew Rayner's offspring. Blood had, in her case, been thinner than water, for the casual friends of her own set had seemed nearer to her than the Skepton cousins. She was her mother's daughter, and Lady Magdalen had thought of girls born and bred within two miles of a manufacturing town as a distinct species, no more possible for intimacy than Bosjesmen or Aztecs. She considered that she behaved handsomely to her brother-in-law's family when she invited them twice in a season to an evening party. The girls were good-looking; or they would scarcely have received this scant civility.

"It is all very horrible," repeated Pearl.

"Did you suppose there were no horrible things in life, no black lives?"

"Surely God meant His creatures to be happy."

"If so He has not been able to realise His intention."

"That sounds blasphemous," said Pearl, "but I heard a curious sermon once from a quite young preacher. He said that God was all good, but not all powerful, that there was an element of evil always fighting against Him."

"Old-fashioned people call that element the Devil. I am like your young preacher. I believe in the Devil," said Claudia. "He has the upper hand."

She resumed her restless roaming about the room. She stopped to look out of the window, where the rain was still beating the glass. She looked down at the Coupé Company's brougham waiting in front of the glass porch. Perhaps Pearl weighed the hired brougham and the furnished house in Norfolk Square against Claudia's choice of sumptuous carriages and

all the splendours of the White House, and thought it unreasonable in her rich cousin to persist in sorrow. To mourn for her dead was commendable and proper from the Skepton point of view, say for half a year, while she still wore her first mourning; but sorrow ought to shade off from dark to light when the etiquette of grief prescribed pale greys and lavenders, with a profusion of pleated tulle.

Claudia fancied she could read the girl's mind as she stood there, hesitating and a little embarrassed, feeling that her visit had been an intrusion.

"Well, good-bye, Claudia, dear," Pearl said abruptly, and did not offer to kiss those pale lips whose natural tint was so exquisite a carnation.

And then she went off to a round of farewell visits among girl friends, who kissed her at parting, and told her that her hat was "too lovely for words," and who seemed to her a great deal nearer than the blood-relation in the Park Lane picture-gallery.

"Poor Claudia! With all her wealth she is much to be pitied," Pearl told herself, as she recalled the white face and haggard eyes.

Mathew Rayner's children had never envied their rich cousins the magnificence that seemed a natural appanage of the head of the house. Mathew was manager at the works with a big salary, and a commission on profits. His income rarely dropped below six thousand a year, for Ralph Rayner reckoned his capital by millions, and a thousand was the unit, so it was not likely that he would stint his brother's wages. His father had left him the original business, and all its belongings, the prodigious expansion and transformation of the works being his own single-handed achievement; and upon coming into his kingdom he had offered his younger brother the post of general manager with a salary of four thousand a year.

"You'll be obliged to live near the works, and you can have Vale Hall to live in rent free. The place is no use to me. My wife wouldn't sleep within ten miles of our furnaces, much less within two."

The house that was of no use to Ralph Rayner

was a house that embodied all his father's ideas of splendour, all his father's ambitions and desires. He had built it at what had seemed to him the zenith of an eminently fortunate career—those after developments of his son's being a flight beyond his wing-power. The great stone house had risen slowly, with the strength and solidity of a fortress, while Ralph and his brother were at a preparatory school at Ilkley. The family lived at Skepton in those days, happy in the midst of smoke, and it had been one of the amusements of the holidays to watch the progress of the building, a joy to watch, but intolerably slow. The Tudor windows, the Gothic porch, the ornamental gables, the spacious rooms and massive staircase, all had been things of delight and pride; but Lady Magdalen's husband had no use for a mansion set in a ring of manufacturing towns, albeit some thirty acres of well-timbered meadow-land made believe to be a park, and gave dignity to the successful manufacturer's home.

Life at Vale Hall was all pleasantness, and Mathew's two sons and three daughters had grown up in a home where neither care nor strife had ever entered. An indulgent father, too much absorbed by the interests of the great iron works to be exacting or troublesome about domestic details, a cheerful, easily-pleased mother, always enchanted with the people and the things that belonged to her, had made the wheels of life run smoothly for the Rayners of Vale Hall. The boys had gone to good schools, and had done well at Cambridge, coming straight from the 'Varsity to the works without a murmur. The girls had been educated at home by a model German governess, and had enjoyed every educational advantage that could be crowded into the space of a London season after they were grown up. It is needless to say that although neither of them had a marked talent for music, two out of the three had abandoned the piano for the more soul-searching rapture of the violin. Vale Hall was large enough for the indulgence of a taste that might have made a smaller house intolerable; so Pearl and Ruby scraped their fifty-guinea

fiddles to their hearts' content, and nobody suffered, except the fond mother, who insisted upon hearing them play, although her musical discrimination went no further than the memory of the pieces she had played in her girlhood, so that she sometimes hurt her daughter's feelings by mistaking the study by Bach, recently and laboriously acquired, for the little easy gigue by Corelli mastered a year ago.

"It doesn't pay to play the great composers for you, mother," Pearl would say impatiently.

"My dears, there is no one appreciates your music more than I do. It is so restful," the mother answered fondly, it being her habit to lay down her work upon her lap, and subside into the pillowy depths of her arm-chair, as the first of those long searching chords on Pearl's fiddle set the lamp-shades quivering, and slowly, very slowly, the middle-aged eyelids drooped over the kind eyes, and sometimes, only once in a way, a gentle snore mingled with the long-drawn scroop of the bow, unheard by the fiddler.

The Rayners of Vale Hall were a typical provincial family, brought up in the religion of home. They were a kind of mutual admiration society, and whatever any member of the family did, said, or thought was excellent in the sight of the others. The "Pater" was a grand gentleman; the "Mater" was every inch a lady. Theodore and Algernon were miles ahead of the young men of their acquaintance.

Pearl was a musical genius; Veronica was a girl of sound sense and business capacity; Ruby was less gifted in music and rarely played in tune, but she was so attractive in person and manner that her mission in life was to charm; and she had no occasion to do anything else. Vale Hall was a favoured spot, where gardens, stables, servants—even to the youngest scrap of a scullery-maid—were all better than the gardens, stables, and servants of other prosperous families. Other people might pride themselves on their gardens, and believe in their horses, because the human mind is prone to error, but the Rayners knew better, and did not admire, much less covet, their neighbours' goods.

Mathew's parents had a massive taste in furniture, and the splendours of Vale Hall were all on a large scale, and of a solidity corresponding with the house. There were no floral chintzes, no white walls and pastel tints at Vale Hall, but there were things of Egyptian or Pompeian durability, carved walnut furniture, stamped velvet curtains, wall-papers of satin surface and powerful colours, a suggestion of Copenhagen or St. Petersburg in fabrics and colouring. Forty years had wrought revolutions in the fashion of house-decoration, and it was forty years since Vale Hall was furnished; but Mathew Rayner and his wife never faltered in their belief in the things that were theirs, and if the houses they saw in London looked gayer and daintier, they condemned the Sheraton tables and cabinets and the delicate chintz upholstery for their ephemeral charms, and asked how long such furniture could be expected to last.

They were good people, excellent in all the relations of life, and they had never obtruded themselves upon Claudia, but at the best she had only tolerated them. She was completely her mother's child, and though in brain power she had been her mother's superior, it was from that adored mother she had taken her opinions of life and of people. Lady Magdalen had made sport of the Rayners of Vale Hall. She had laughed at their virtues, their domestic affection, a family so united as to seem not several persons, but one solid block of humanity, since you could not touch one without moving the others. Lady Magdalen had never been uncivil to them; but she had given her tongue free scope when she talked to her daughter; and Claudia had grown up with the idea that Mathew Rayner's family belonged to those ridiculous masses outside her own world, the great race of impossible people.

She had thought of them lightly enough while her mother was well and happy, and life was still pleasant, in spite of the burden of putting on fine frocks and pearl necklaces to meet people who only bored one; but after her mother's fatal illness, and still more after her brother's tragic death, her feelings of disdainful

amusement had changed to repulsion that was almost hatred. She could not forgive this kindred family whom death had never ravaged, these commonplace young men, with their rude health and vigour, men who seemed built for success and happiness, unconsciously arrogant in their strength of limb and steadiness of brain, believing in themselves and in each other. She raged against the serene lives of such men, for whom the universe offered no insoluble problems, whose utmost range of thought was circumscribed by the rules of commercial arithmetic, the knowledge of good and bad in the raw material of their trade. There was no flaw in those dull brains, no weakness in those stalwart frames. They had the utmost power to enjoy and the smallest capacity to suffer. She thought of the self-satisfied daughters, the jovial father, and placid, easy-going mother, the home where domestic love, a tepid, comfortable, unexacting, unsuspicious affection, made an atmosphere of tranquil light, not the fierce glory of a midsummer sun, but the calm light of a grey afternoon in March, when the clouds are high. She thought of them half in contempt, and half in anger. It was a paltry kind of happiness; but oh, what worlds away from her life in its bleak loneliness and its agonising memories of those two creatures she had loved.

She had lost all—all! She stopped suddenly in her roaming to and fro, like a young tigress in her restricted den, stopped before a long panel of glass between two windows, arrested by a thought.

She considered the image in the glass scornfully, the strong young face, ghastly in its sick-whiteness against the dead black gown, the eyes unnaturally large and with an angry light in them, the futile rage of a dissatisfied soul, hungering for something that would conjure her from death into life. Too young to be dead alive, yet with nothing to live for!

"People used once to call me handsome," she said to herself, looking at the image intently, "but no man ever really loved me. Many have pretended, and some, perhaps, began to care for me, but there was something in me that repelled them all. They

were weaklings, most of them, and I could only love strength, a mind stronger than my own, a character better than my own. I was waiting for perfection—the ideal—and it never came my way. And who could care for me now? I have passed beyond the possibility of love."

She flung herself into a chair, weary of movement, yet no less weary of repose. She moved restlessly in the low easy chair, tossed herself from side to side, and then she snatched up a little book from a table near her, one of those delicious little books that can fill idle moments and people empty minds. *Hamlet*, in the last new edition, opened at random.

> "O God! God!
> How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
> Seems to me all the uses of this world!"

The butler announced Lord Frankland.

She started to her feet at the name, surprised. It was two years since she had seen Lord Frankland, and he was one of the men she had thought of just now, one who had begun to care for her, and whom something adverse in her nature had repelled. She thought he had no right to call upon her. No one had the right to come into her world of sorrow till she had given them leave. She had made it very plain to her women friends that she did not want them, might never want them again. Her letters acknowledging sympathy and friendship had been letters that warned the sympathisers to keep aloof.

"I am fortunate in finding you at home," said the visitor, after he had taken her cold, unwilling hand.

"Not if you want cheerful society," she answered. "This detestable day has got upon my nerves."

"Then I hope I may be able to divert your ideas from the bad weather, even if I only succeed in boring you."

"You must have a great deal to tell me about yourself," she said, wanting to be civil to a man who had been of the better class in the mob of her acquaintance. "It is ages since we met, and I

believe you have been doing great things in the political line."

"You read the papers?"

"Sometimes; and I hear my father talk—sometimes."

"Mr. Rayner is too busy a man to be much at home. As for my work, it is not worth speaking of; but I try in my poor way to help in keeping things moving, the things that make for reform; and I am not like the fly on the wheel, I know the infinitesimal effect of my labours."

"Most of the work of politicians seems as slow as the movement of glaciers. Yet something has been done in the last two hundred years, since we don't hang a boy of twelve for cutting a stick in a hedge nowadays. There, at least, is something gained."

"Yes, that means progress. When George the Second was king, I daresay people were proud of themselves for having left off burning witches, though they still believed in witchcraft."

The topic was exhausted, and there was a pause while Claudia twirled the leaves of the duodecimo *Hamlet*, and sat with lowered eyelids looking at the pages.

Her manner did not encourage frivolous conversation. He had much to say, and had come there with grave and settled purpose, determined to say the thing that was in his mind. He was not a procrastinator, never inclined to put off a business because it was difficult. In his time in the Lower House he had fought adverse constituencies, had won a seat more than once from the enemy, gaining votes by the sheer force of a calm courage that smiled its quiet, self-satisfied smile at opposition. He had a manner and a mode of argument that often conquered opponents, and always convinced waverers. He was a clever debater, intensely earnest, and unwearied in any cause he had at heart. His promotion to the Upper House had been a serious loss to his party.

Whatever happened he was a man of mark, with an undoubted capacity for public life, and with just enough of science and of general culture to distinguish

him from the herd of young men. Refinement was the chief characteristic of his mind and person, a refined taste in art, literature, and in conduct, an abhorrence of coarse and common people and things. Without being handsome his face was attractive, a thoughtful face, grave in repose, but with sudden lights and flashes of gaiety in the company he liked. In uncongenial society he became a man of stone.

Three years ago, when he was only James Dene, he had been obviously interested in Claudia, and had been a noted figure in her train of admirers. Lady Magdalen had given him all possible encouragement. He had been invited to Daneborough Towers, the place in Derbyshire, had ridden, walked, and played tennis and croquet with Claudia, and had been made much of by Claudia's mother. Even the girl herself, the girl who had frightened away so many aspirants, had not been blind to his merits. It pleased her to have so clever a young man at her feet. And then, all at once, when he was beginning to be in love with her, just when she had become something more to him than a fashionable beauty, she sickened of his attentions, and drove him from her by the subtle changes of mood which made her what her girl friends called "difficult."

Lady Magdalen was chagrined, and disappointed.

"That is the man I wanted you to marry," she said, heart-brokenly.

"Dearest, why didn't you tell me? You know I would do anything in the world to please you—even marry and leave you, which would be quite the hardest thing to do. Why not tell me?"

"It would have been the wrong thing with a girl of your temperament."

"Oh, but I would have taken any order from you. I may be granite for other people, but for you I am wax. You might mould me how you like. See how I go to balls, and parties with you—a mill-round—though I loathe them. You should have told me, *Querida*."

A Spanish word dropped from the lips of mother and daughter now and then, when their talk was intimate. Lady Magdalen had Spanish ancestors, and she and

her daughter cultivated Spanish people and read Spanish authors and cherished a fond idea that they could be happier at Madrid or Buenos Ayres than they could be in London.

"I almost wish I had told you. But I would not for the world influence you against your inclination."

"I have no inclination for anybody or anything, but you, and to please you, and on a lower plane for Michael. And James Dene is not as odious as the ruck of mankind. I would have tolerated him to please you. But he is gone; and he will not come back."

"No, he will not come back. He would not be the man I admire if he could come back."

"After all, he never asked me to marry him."

"You never let him come near enough for that."

"No," said the girl, holding out her long, firm arm. "I kept him at arms' length, when there was any hint of love-making."

Claudia remembered that conversation, half serious, half playful, as she sat in her desolation to-day, face to face with the man her mother wanted her to marry; and that idolised mother had passed into the world where there was neither marrying nor giving in marriage, and where, if Claudia wanted to follow her, she must go as a spirit, free from all the desires and instincts of mortal clay.

"It can't matter to her now," she thought.

The silence was becoming oppressive, when Frankland drew his chair nearer hers, and tried to take her hand, a feat he found impossible; and then, before she knew how he began his speech he was telling her that he loved her, had gone on loving her after her coldness had driven him away.

"You did your uttermost to freeze my heart, but the fire went on burning in spite of your unkindness, in spite of my wounded pride."

"I never meant to be unkind," she answered in a low, level voice, "I was only very weary—weary of most things upon earth—not more of you than of other things."

"It was the conventional life that wearied you, the

perpetual movement without progress. I can understand what girls feel after three or four seasons. Their spirits sink under the monotony of their pleasures. Over and over again, the same thing over and over again! So that any new occupation—any new game—bicycles, motor-cars, bridge—is taken up madly. What have they to live for? They are not bread-winners. Nobody depends upon them. They lack the stimulus of a career to make or mar."

"A career! Yes, I believe that is what you have always thought about."

"I have always done the best work that it was in me to do, but with you to go hand in hand with me, you with your strong brain and power to understand life and its deepest meanings, the highest hill would be easy. I want you, Claudia, I want you for my comrade, my helper, my wife."

There was real tenderness in his voice as he spoke the last word.

"Is there not something else you want, something more necessary to success, something that my father's daughter can bring you?" Claudia asked, looking at him for the first time since he had talked of love.

Her eyes were not angry now, but there was something worse than anger, something coldly contemptuous, as of one who will not take the trouble to be angry.

"If you mean to imply that I am a fortune-hunter," he began, flushing and drawing back.

"No, not a fortune-hunter, but a man who can measure the importance of money, and whose first thought is of the means that can help him to success. Three years ago you were kind enough to pay me a good deal of attention. I liked you, perhaps, better than I had ever liked any man who was not of my own blood. I knew you were clever. I even admired you for being eager and ambitious, keen to shoulder other men out of your path. Yes, I liked and admired you. And then, all at once, I wearied of you as I had wearied of the world I lived in, and I fear I was rude to you, for it is rude to let people see that they have ceased to interest one. It was the disgust of

life that I was beginning to feel, even then while I had my mother, heart of my heart. Well, I was impertinent and disagreeable, and you let me understand that all was finished. You had never declared yourself, you had been of two minds about me. My father had pinned all his hopes upon his son. I counted for very little in his life, and my fortune was problematical. You went away, and thought no more of me."

"I never ceased to think of you. That is three years ago, and I challenge you to discover that I have ever paid attention to any other woman since then."

"Oh, that is your temperament; and you have had your career to think about. You have been absorbed in the question whether you are to be William Pitt or nothing."

"I have thought of you—always," he said doggedly, with an air that seemed like truth.

"And now that my brother is gone—now that my father has only me—only the daughter he never cared for, but who must needs be his heiress—you come back, to ask me to marry you."

"I am not ashamed of asking for you—and your fortune. I am not afraid of telling you the plain truth. I have never cared for money, as money. I could never be proud of wealth, never want to be richer than the men among whom I live—but in my circumstances money would be a powerful factor, for it would restore the waste places, redeem the land that is starving for want of gold—*la terre qui meurt.* I have thousands of acres, mortgaged, badly farmed, by badly-housed workers, by needy tenants perishing for want of capital. Is it unworthy in the owner of such an estate to wish to marry wealth as well as beauty and charm? As the mistress of Dene you would be following in the footsteps of many good women. It would be in your power to equal or excel the best of them, and to make our estate a model for modern landowners."

He began coldly, but his speech warmed almost to passion as he spoke of the hereditary estate that he

loved, the good that gold could do for the land and those who had to live upon it. He knew that in offering himself and his name he was making no contemptible offer. He was the holder of a title that had descended in unbroken line from a Dene who fought on Bosworth field, a Dene who fought at Flodden, a Dene who died for Charles Stuart the day that Falkland fell. Heroes on land and on sea, legislators, churchmen, the Denes were a race whereof a man might be justly proud. Nor did he consider his own personal aspirations unworthy to be counted. Whatever woman he married would be a great lady by the time middle-age and expanding charms indicated the political re-union after the cabinet dinner. She would have weight and influence, whoever she might be, since it was unthinkable that he could ever marry anybody but a lady. With Claudia's prospective wealth she would be almost royal, the influence of intellect and beauty quadrupled by the influence of gold.

"Your fortune would be of inestimable value in my career," he said gravely, after a silence, "but if you think I would marry a woman I did not love with all my soul and strength, you know very little of my character."

"I know nothing. I can only guess. You say you would not marry a woman you did not love. Would you marry a woman who did not love you, who could never love you, who would take you as an escape from the monotony of her life, to share your career, to profit by your success in the world, without caring a straw for you?"

There was a pause, and then he answered deliberately.

"No, I would not."

"Then you must not ask me to be your wife; for fear I should say yes."

He stood for a minute, motionless, like a man of stone. Then he snatched her hand with sudden vehemence, not to be eluded this time. He drew her nearer him, looking into her eyes, and trying to read the brain behind them. Then he let her go,

took up his hat, and moved slowly towards the door, looking at her all the time.

"You are a hard woman," he said.

That was all. The door closed upon him. She put her hand upon the bell with an automatic movement, and stood looking at the ground. She knew that he was gone out of her life for ever; and this second time the thing seemed more serious, for she knew that he had really cared for her, and she knew that there was no one else in the world who cared.

She resumed her roaming up and down, restless, miserable, till the door was opened discreetly by an unseen footman, to make way for the tumultuous entrance of two creatures without society manners.

These were her dogs, returned from their afternoon airing. One was Chieftain, a superb white colley, proud of himself, and indifferent to his human acquaintance, except when they gave him sugar. He went straight to his favourite rug, and laid himself down, knowing that to be beautiful was enough. The other was Rag, the fox-terrier, who sprang into Claudia's lap, put his paws on her shoulders, panting and almost hysterical with rapture, and licked her face as if they had been parted for years.

"Yes, there is someone that loves me, there is always you," she said.

And then, with her face against the dog's long, lean head, the hard woman melted into tears.

CHAPTER III.

Michael Rayner's history is the history of a man whose emotions governed his mind. He had been a success at Eton, and his father was proud of him, looking forward eagerly to the day when he might stand for one of those West Riding constituencies in which the Rayner influence would go far to ensure victory. Ralph Rayner wanted to see his son in Parliament, as the first stage on the road to a peerage. He had never thought of a Parliamentary career for himself. It would have been too much trouble; and it would have taken him away from the things he loved, his iron-works, his improvements and inventions, the rising-tide of prosperity that made him a wonder in the manufacturing world. Nor did he desire a baronetcy, to be called Sir Ralph, and to take precedence of distinguished commoners. He was too self-confident, too secure in his own predominance over the ruck of men, to care for anything so paltry as a brand-new baronetcy. But as the golden tide rose year after year it pleased him to think of his only son as a great landowner, and the first Baron Daneborough. The central point in Mr. Rayner's Derbyshire property was the little town of Daneborough, consisting of a twelfth-century church, a street of substantial stone houses climbing up a steep hill, a market-place with a mediaeval cross, a pound, and the stocks, an ancient timber erection which had once been the terror of scolds and vagabonds. He thought of his son as Lord Daneborough, in distant years when the boy had become a middle-aged man, father of a stalwart race, and when he, Ralph Rayner, would have done with the turmoil of life.

Michael was one of the red Rayners. He had curly brown hair tinged with red, and the white skin that often goes with red hair. He was like his father, but he had not his father's florid complexion, nor his father's broad shoulders and large frame. The resemblance was strong enough to satisfy Ralph Rayner. He admired and adored his wife; but Claudia's dark beauty left him cold. He wanted his children to be like him, to bear the stamp of his strong individuality, to be pieces of himself. The girl never forgot how he put her away from him with his large firm hand one day, as he said, "Yes, she is a lovely child, but she is not a Rayner."

"What does papa mean?" she asked her mother quickly, as she clambered on to her lap.

"Papa means that you are not like him or his family. You are a dark little girl, like me."

"I want to be like you. I don't want to be like an ugly red man."

She was between four and five years old when this little scene occurred, and she had never forgotten it. By the time she was fifteen she had made up her mind that she and her father were no nearer or dearer than strangers passing each other in the street. He was never unkind, and he allowed her mother to be as indulgent as she pleased, so that all things that can give delight were lavished upon the girl at every stage of her existence. But he had a way of trying to be kind, affecting an interest he did not feel, that set her teeth on edge.

The boy was the pride of his heart. The boy was made in his own image, and would like the things he liked, would tread the path he had staked out, and realise all his day-dreams. But children are sent into the world for something else than to run in ready-made grooves, and Michael had not been at Oxford a year before the first cold blast of disappointment chilled his father's heart.

He was only eighteen when he made up his mind that wealth such as his father held was a crime. To garner his millions and live in wanton luxury while men and women by myriads were existing below the

hunger line. To hang priceless pictures on the walls of vast reception rooms—splendid deserts where no one came except on gala nights—while men and women in fever-haunted dens were heaped together like carrion flies in the shambles. To deck his wife and daughter in finery which strained the inventive power of court-dressmakers in the research of costliness. To squander gold upon footmen's liveries and silk stockings, in a city where the night was haunted by prowling spectres, police-driven from bench to doorstep, denied even the solace of sleep. Were not these things sins that cried to heaven for vengeance ? It was only after she had trodden the mill-round of mundane pleasures, that Claudia began to suffer from the disgust of life ; but upon Michael the disgust of wealth came in the years of adolescence, while the majority of his companions lived only to amuse themselves. There was a minority that took life seriously and went in for philanthropy, a group of young men who were almost as intense as John Wesley and his fellow-students at the same college in the dawn of Methodism, and these had established a mission in South-East London, where Michael Rayner began his apprenticeship to the business of philanthropy. He was in his third year at Christ Church, and his father was expecting him to take a brilliant degree, when he declared his views of life, and duty, and the lot that he had chosen. His ideas had gone much farther than the Oxford Mission. He had discovered a little band of enthusiasts who had been inspired by the character and the life of St. Francis of Assisi. They belonged to no denomination, were subject to no control, but had made their own rule of poverty and work—a rule which they followed with unflinching severity. They wore no habit, for they desired to move about their merciful work unmarked by any badge. Their clothes were those of a city clerk on a starvation salary, and they wore them till they were threadbare, considering the cheap grey suit, shabby from long usage, a modern substitute for the brown woollen frock and rope girdle. They called themselves the Free Friars, and devoted their lives to labour among the lost tribes of populous

places. For their model they had gone back to the primordial brotherhood in the beginning of the Saint's unfettered work among the miserable of the earth. They were to live, as far as possible in the changed order of things, as St. Francis and his faithful companions lived when they were few; and although in these latter days they could not subsist upon casual alms like those early companions in the simpler manners of mediaeval Italy, or maintain themselves by their own labour while spending themselves in labour for others, they could at least limit the cost of existence to the bare necessaries of an ascetic regimen. Penury and hardships were to be their portion; and they were to live this life of self-surrender in the spirit of their saintly exemplar, to tread the thorny path with light step and joyous heart, to bring cheerfulness into the haunts of misery, to give with smiles and pleasant words, to carry the promise of pardon for sin, a happier life in heaven, and to preach the gospel of gladness.

They had no local establishment, no abiding city. They were wanderers, and went wherever help was most wanted, wherever the cry of suffering humanity called loudest. Distance did not frighten them. They would start on the longest journeys at an hour's notice—India, Africa, the South Seas, the Continent of Europe, or some pest-stricken English town. It mattered not whence the cry came. It was for them to answer: "I am coming."

Most of them were men whom life had disappointed, men who had nothing to choose between suicide and self-surrender. Most of them were men of means, for the mission demanded much money, since the cry that came oftenest was a cry for bread, and it would be vain to answer it empty-handed. Some were young enthusiasts, for whom the inequalities of fortune cried aloud to the Christian conscience, and these were mostly the sons of rich men, who were surrendering much; but no disciple with quite such splendid expectations as Michael's had cast in his lot with the brotherhood till he joined them.

It was a bitter day for Ralph Rayner when his son told him the story of the Free Friars.

He had known of the Mission in Bermondsey and Walworth, and had regretted that his son should devote the long vacation to slumming, instead of shooting grouse in Argyllshire; but he had shrugged his shoulders and made no objection.

He told himself that a passion for philanthrophy was but a passing phase in a young man's life, like foppery, or a taste for blue china.

"I never took the fever myself," he said, discussing his son with the practical Mathew, "I was too busy. You and I went through no phases, Mat. The works were enough. And your sons are like us—no nonsense about them."

The phase, as he called it, gave him no uneasiness; though he found that Michael was spending more money on Walworth and Bermondsey than he had spent on wines and horses and Bullingdon dinners, in his first year at the 'Varsity. The money did not matter; nothing mattered while the idolised son was well and happy, a splendid youth in the gay brightness of early manhood, a son to be proud of. He praised his nephews for their common-sense and business capacity; but he was glad that his son was different. His son had to shine in a finer atmosphere. His grandfather, Lord Altrincham, had been a man of mark.

"The blue blood is bound to show itself," thought Rayner, intensely proud of his wife's lineage, though there was a flaw in the family history, that Spanish-American marriage three generations ago, which had introduced black eyes and blue-black hair into the racial beauty, and which had ended tragically.

It was a dark day in October when the revelation was made, and it was one of the dark days in Ralph Rayner's prosperous life.

"When does term begin?" he asked his son, as they rose from the breakfast table at Daneborough, where Michael had reappeared the night before, after an absence of several weeks.

"The term began yesterday; but I am not going back," Michael answered quietly.

"Not going back! Do you mean that you have been expelled—disgraced—sent down—or whatever they call it?" his father exclaimed furiously, the red growing deeper on cheek and brow.

Lady Magdalen was on her feet in an instant, and hurried to her husband's side.

"Don't be angry, I know he can have done nothing wrong," she said.

"No; I am not sent down. I have written to my college tutor to explain everything, and I came home last night to make my explanation to you, father."

"You have chucked your 'varsity career without a word to me, you, who could have taken a first in greats, if you had worked hard! Your tutor told me as much. But come, Mike, there's nothing irrevocable in a silly letter to your tutor. Wire to him that you'll be in Oxford to-night. There's a train from Derby at eleven. You can be there this afternoon."

"It is no use, father. I am not going back. I have made up my mind."

"Your mind, you skunk!" cried Ralph, beside himself. "But what about my mind? I shall wire to the tutor fellow, and I order you to go back to Oxford by the first train that will take you there, and to work your damned hardest for another year. Sap, as you call it, sap, sir, and come out in the lists as my son ought to come."

"It is no use, father," Michael repeated quietly, and then he turned to his mother with exceeding gentleness. "Don't look scared, dear," he said, slipping his arm through hers and leading her out of the room. "My father and I are not going to quarrel. I am not an undutiful son. I have only made up my mind as to what I have to do in the world, and what life means for me. It doesn't mean a first in greats, or a seat in Parliament, or an idle life in Park Lane. It means something quite different."

She looked at him in agonising alarm, fearing that he was mad; but the steady light in his eyes reassured her.

"Oh, my dearest, don't let there be bad blood between you and your father," she said urgently.

"He is so proud of you. He has built all his hopes upon you. Don't disappoint him."

"I'm afraid I must disappoint him, mother. We have come to the parting of the ways."

They had crossed the hall while they were talking, and he opened the door of her morning-room where the proud, crested cockatoo screamed a welcome, and the Marron poodle bounded from the most luxurious of all the easy chairs and galloped across the floor to meet her.

"Michael, Michael, don't make us all miserable," she moaned, as he kissed her pale forehead and left her.

He went back to his father, who was walking up and down the room, raging.

"What the devil does it mean?" he asked fiercely. "Have you married a barmaid? Have you been backing horses? If it's money-trouble, be frank, Mike. Did I ever stint you?"

"My dear father, you have been more than generous; and your money has done good. You will never know how much good it has done. No, I am not likely to vex you by any vulgar trouble—cards, horses, loose-lived women. But I fear I shall disappoint you. I have taken my Lady Poverty for my mistress."

His father began to think he was mad, just as his mother had done a few minutes before. He could only stare at the young man in dumb distress. That placid kind of lunacy was more awful than violent dementia. So calm, with such a steadfast air and measured speech, and yet a madman. Delirium without fever! That was the common definition of madness.

"I told my mother that you and I could never quarrel. I love you too well; I am too grateful for the love you have given me; for my happy boyhood, for the days in which we have been companions and friends. But we have come to the parting of the ways. A man has but one life, and he must live it as heart and mind and conscience move him to live. I have done with wealth, except so far as I can use it for the suffering, the outcasts, the lost and de-

graded—lost, but not for ever, lying among the dogs like Lazarus, but to be exalted like him."

"You are mad—yes, mad! It is the fatal strain in your blood, the secret history of a hundred years ago, rising up against me to-day. For God's sake, Michael, put this folly from you! Be as pious as you choose, and as benevolent; spend your vacation working among young fellows from your college, instead of climbing mountains or shooting grouse; do your bit of good in the world, but beware of enthusiasm. In your case it might be fatal. There are plenty of madmen in the world—missionaries, philanthropists, socialists, Christian-scientists—whatever they like to call themselves. I want my son to be sane, a sound mind in a sound body. Let us have no more talk of my Lady Poverty. A fortune such as you will inherit is a fulcrum that can help a wise man to move mountains. Go back to Oxford, take a first-class degree, and go into Parliament. You can fight the battle of the outcasts and the helpless there as Frankland has done, without ceasing to be a sane man and a gentleman."

"That is not my view of life. Self-surrender means that I give up all; even your affection, if you consider my way of life an offence."

And then quite calmly, but with the glow of a sublime conviction, the young man expounded his view of life, and told his father what he was going to do.

He had cast in his lot with the Free Friars, that heroic little brotherhood who had founded their order upon St. Francis of Assisi, and had taken the Lady Poverty for their bride. All that they had of this world's gear, or ever were to have, was to be surrendered. They were to own nothing, not even the clothes they wore, nor the books they read, of nothing earthly could they say "it is mine." He could only join them at first as a novice. For a year he would work with them and live as they lived; but he would be free to leave them. At the end of the year, if he were still of the same opinion, he would take the vows of celibacy and poverty. He would forego all that the love of woman can give to man; he would

bind himself for the rest of his life to the poorest community outside the Roman Church.

"And six months later you would be a Papist," cried his father. "These modern orders—shams—the monkey tricks of fools who think they can put back the calendar five hundred years, and model themselves upon an ignorant mediaeval friar in the age of Darwin and Huxley, Spencer and Clifford. I wonder at your folly. I wonder at you! You are almost too absurd to make me angry; but you must drop this rubbish, Mike, drop it before it makes bad blood between us."

There was bad blood already beating and bubbling against Ralph Rayner's skull. He was trying to keep himself calm, trying to make himself believe that this last development of altruism was only a phase in his son's life, like his work in Walworth and Bermondsey. It was youth's passionate beneficence, the impulse of a generous heart that would take a personal bent later when the young man fell in love, and when a mundane enchantress would dethrone his Lady Poverty. If the boy's brain was sound, if there was no flaw *there*, the father could face the hazard of the future. Michael would sicken of the fanatic's life before the year of novitiate was half over, and, so long as the Papists did not get hold of him, there would be little fear. These mock Franciscans could have no lasting power over him. The whole thing must seem like a stage play, an order that was no order, a brotherhood without a head, just a crew of addle-pated young men making experiments with life.

"Come, my lad, let us be friends, father and son, with the same hope, the same ambition. I have nursed that hope for nearly twenty years, ever since you were put into my arms, a morsel of humanity, but big enough to hold my dream of the future. You can't be so heartless as to shatter that long-cherished hope. You don't mean to break my heart."

"God forbid! But I must live my own life, and it cannot be in Park Lane. Modern luxury suffocates me. The splendour in which we live has been hateful

to me since I have seen the life-long agony of semi-starvation, the lean children, the haggard mothers, shrunken limbs, hollow cheeks, the hell of dirt and hunger. Think of it, father, when you are kneeling in some toy church, a place of jewelled windows and costly vestments and salaried singers, think of it when you pray to our Father for daily bread. Daily bread! Your chef at three hundred a year; your table with its hot-house flowers and old silver; your butler and powdered footmen! Give us our daily bread! Canvas-backed ducks from America, livers of tortured geese from Strasburg. Champagne of some famous vintage. Scattered gold, wasted gold, while they are withering for want of bread, they who buy their tea and sugar by the farthing's-worth, and call a halfpenny herring a treat!"

His father had been walking about the room with rapid steps, irritated to fever-point. He stopped short now, and turned upon his son with an angry laugh.

"Have you forgotten what Burchell said when the London ladies were rodomontading? Fudge! Double-distilled fudge! If men who have made money didn't spend it freely, spend it on pomp and luxury for which they themselves don't care a jot—God knows that I do not—what would become of trade? Do you remember the Pommeroy work-shop we saw at Rheims, and how many hands were employed in getting a bottle of champagne ready for the market, contented drudges who were *not* in a state of semi-starvation, but who may have to starve when some Peter the Hermit persuades people that it is a crime to drink dear wine while a certain proportion of the population are hard up."

"Yes, I remember the champagne factory, the infinite division of labour—human machines doing the same trivial scrap of work day after day, year after year, perhaps—sticking on a label, tying a bit of wire, a task that a trained monkey might do as well. Hopeless monotony for brain and hand! Yes, I remember them, and I know how one of the greatest minds in France revolted against such brain-destroying drudgery."

"Fudge! There are men and women who are fit for no higher work, human machines, if you like, but happy enough if they have food and shelter. There must always be thousands of such. Do you think human clay is all of the same quality? Or do you forget that I have helped to establish village industries, have fostered talent wherever I found it?"

"I know you have been generous."

"Generous be d——d! I have given bread to thousands, plentiful food and healthful homes, schools, clubs, hospitals, libraries and recreation grounds. What more could I do?"

"Christ has answered that question. 'Sell all that you have and give to the poor.' To live as we live here and in Park Lane is to live a life of sin. You do not know how black that sin is. You have never been into the depths; you don't know the nethermost pit of suffering."

"No; I leave the decadents and the incapables to faddists like your Oxford friends. My care has been for the capable and the willing; so much comfort for so much work; a fair exchange. And in the thirty-five years that I have been at the helm there has never been a strike among our hands, for they have had justice without fighting for it, and there is not a man in the West Riding who would not point to Skepton as the realisation of all that is good for the workman as well as for the master."

He was pacing the room all the time in a tempest of indignation. The idol he had made for himself had fallen and crushed him.

Presently, moved by an impulse of overwhelming affection, humbling himself to the dust, he came to Michael and laid his hands upon his shoulders, looking at him with eyes that pleaded almost piteously. "My lad, remember what we have been to each other," he muttered hoarsely. "Don't disappoint me."

"Father, whatever this heart can hold of human love will be always yours; but I have a Master who said, 'whoso loveth father or mother more than Me——'"

"Idiot, fanatic!" cried Ralph Rayner in a fury;

and the hands that had grasped his son in love flung him away in uncontrollable rage.

Michael reeled under the sudden thrust, and dropped heavily into a chair, as his father hurried out of the room.

The young man sat in a dejected attitude, with his elbows on his knees and his head bent upon clasped hands, while the clock on the mantelpiece chimed more than one quarter. It was hard upon his father, so good a father, take him for all in all so good a man. But on Michael's banner—that mystical banner which he could see as plainly as the gaudy embroideries of Saint or Madonna that he had seen in the temples of an advanced Ritual—the words were "No surrender." He had made his ideal life, and he meant to live it, whatever the cost.

He left Daneborough within an hour of the stormy interview, after writing a letter which his father found on his table when he returned from a long cold walk over the hills, a ramble in which he had not looked or cared where or how far he was going, walking to quiet the fever in his blood, the burning fire of anger against the son he loved.

The letter was grave and earnest, and might have been convincing to a religious man ; but to a Sunday morning Christian like Ralph Rayner those earnest words savoured of madness. He had never rebelled against his God, never questioned the creed he had learnt five-and-forty years before from his nursery governess. He had built churches and helped in the building of chapels, and he had been seen in his place at the morning-service in Derbyshire or in London every Sunday. But when Michael declared that he meant to shape his life by the life of Christ, to follow in the steps of his Divine Exemplar, so far as it was possible for human weakness to imitate the Son of God, Ralph Rayner laid the letter down with a groan and told himself that his son was mad.

Celibacy—the deadlock in the line which was to have gone on and on in the long vista of time, always aspiring, always successful, as he himself had been ! A dead stop, a no-thoroughfare here where he had seen

the smooth road of prosperity mounting upwards, the narrow group of kindred expanding from a family to a clan, strong sons and lovely daughters, a dominant race that would look back and revere him as their founder.

Holy poverty! A coarse woollen gown with a bit of rope for a girdle, bare feet, untrimmed beard, poverty in its most repulsive aspect, eccentricity to be mocked at by the world. Utopian schemes, ending in pitiable failure.

The strong man leant his head upon the table and sobbed aloud. Bitter, bitter, bitter disappointment. To have a fanatic for his only son.

The story of his wife's ancestors had been in his mind all that day. Tramping over hill and moor, losing himself in deep wooded glens where the light was dim, he had seen that long-ago tragedy as if it had been a picture. The exquisite Peruvian girl, born of the proudest blood of old Spain, and married to a young diplomat, Lord Edward Moorhouse, the fifth son of an Irish marquis, who had met her at a ball, and had been made her slave in the rapture of a waltz.

For three or four years all had gone fairly well with the secretary and his exotic wife. She was priest-ridden; but she loved her husband and children. And then came the tragedy. A third child was born to her, a boy, the other two being girls; and while the father was rejoicing in the birth of a son, the young mother filled him with consternation by the development of a feverish fanaticism, a gloomy horror of her existence as a wife and mother, and a frantic resolve to break all domestic ties, renounce husband and children, and bury herself alive in the convent of one of the severest orders in Spanish America.

Her life had been in peril after the birth of her child, and when the danger to life was past there came this mental change with its menace of brain-trouble. She was possessed with the idea that she ought never to have left the Carmelite Convent, where she was educated—a motherless child left to the custody of the nuns—and where, in her early girlhood, she had seen visions and had spent hours of delirious

ecstasy before the altar of the Mater Dolorosa, or at the feet of the Pieta in the shadowy dimness of a side chapel. The memory of those supernatural visitations had floated out of her consciousness in the dazzling season of a young beauty's social triumphs; but on her sick-bed, in the delirium of her sleepless nights, those visions had been repeated, and she accepted the fantastic images of a distracted brain as a summons from her Saviour.

She told her heart-broken husband that she had sinned in becoming a wife. The Divine Master had meant her for His service, had sealed her with the seal of His love. All her wedded life had been sin, disobedience, rebellion against her Redeemer; and only by instant renunciation of all she loved could she escape eternal condemnation.

In vain her husband pleaded. She had wealth, and the priests were on her side. She was unhappy, and it was only by leaving a wicked world that she could find peace. Her husband opposed her resolutely, locked his doors against priest and nun, and used what force he could against the enemy without failing in tenderness towards his wife. The struggle lasted for months. Her house was a prison which she never left except in her husband's company. All vehemence of speech and self-assertion ceased. She was tranquil, although dull and brooding, and he hoped that she was in a fair way towards cure. Her boy was a beautiful creature, but she took no notice of him, except when coaxed to do so by her husband or the nurse; and then one night, in the deep dead hours when all the sounds of life are silenced, a wild shriek rang through Lord Edward's house, followed by confused sounds of hurrying footsteps and frightened voices, and the miserable young man found his wife lying by the side of her baby's cradle, mother and boy drowned in each other's blood. She had almost severed the child's head from his neck, the neck that was like the stalk of a flower; and she had cut her own throat desperately with a murderous Turkish yataghan taken from a trophy of arms in the corridor.

Rayner had been told the story of Lady Edward's

crime at San Sebastian, where Señor Penerauda, marquis and diplomat, the head of the Spanish house, welcomed Lady Magdalen and her husband to the villa in which he spent the greater part of his life. There was the ancient ancestral house at Madrid, but there was also a climate which the Señor had never relished, and a service of tramcars which was his abomination.

"All cities are odious, since all cities have become alike," he said.

Lady Magdalen was proud of the streak of Spanish blood, the old, old blood flowing in direct descent from ancestors who had fought for the Cid. She had cherished the story of her great grandfather's Spanish-American wife, who had died suddenly after the birth of her only son, and whose two daughters had been reared in England by their English father, and had made good marriages, so that the Spanish strain had been somewhat widely distributed. The younger of the two girls had married Sir George Burden, a soldier, afterwards distinguished in the Punjaub, and Lady Burden was Magdalen's maternal grandmother, and Magdalen could just remember the dark eyes and iron-grey hair of a stately personage in a velvet gown and point-lace hood, who vanished early from the child's picture of life, a figure that melted away like a dream, and the memory whereof seemed almost as unreal as the dreams of childhood. But the impression had been lasting, and being told that her Spanish ancestors were people who had done grand and romantic deeds, and had been painted by Rembrandt and Velasquez, being told also that her own beauty was Spanish, that she was more of a Peneranda than a Moorhouse, Magdalen cherished a *culte* for Spain and all things Spanish, and read Cervantes and Calderon with enthusiasm.

The story of Manuela's death had never been told her, but that ghastly history had been a shock to Ralph Rayner. He shut the secret in his memory, not being of the weak temperament that is obliged to talk of tormenting things. He hated that spot of madness in his wife's lineage, remote though it

was; but he argued that in the case of a mother after the birth of a child, madness was an accident. There was no hereditary taint to be feared. The child had perished, happily perhaps. The children who had preceded him had been born when the mother was of sound mind.

And now, on this day of despair, unlooked for, unthought of, there had come over his life this dark cloud from the past. Religious mania, the most hopeless of mental diseases, had shown itself in the son he loved. A fanatic, such a fanatic as Manuela Moorhouse had been, possessed with a sudden horror of all that makes for the delight of life, calling wealth sin, as she had called natural affection sin, passionately eager for renunciation, the extinguishment of the individual, the annihilation of self. A fanatic! It was the form of lunacy the strong man most dreaded. He had seen it in a servant, a butler, an efficient and valued servant, changing from cheerful service to protest against the conduct of his fellow-servants and insolent reproof of his master, a little later lapsing into violent mania, and removed to Hanwell and untimely death.

His son a fanatic! The child of many hopes.

Michael had given him an address in London where letters would always reach him. Should his father have serious need of him he would come; but he begged that only in such serious need should he be summoned.

The strong man proved his strength after this long day of painful thought by a calmness that surprised his wife. He showed her the son's letter in a gloomy silence.

"It may be only another phase—a worse phase than the Bermondsey mission," he said, "or it may be a death-blow to our hopes. We must wait. There is to be a year of novitiate—and a year is a long time at nineteen. We must harden our hearts, Magda, and wait."

His gentleness touched her, and she went to him and bent over his stooping shoulders caressingly. He had thrown himself into a low chair by the fire

in her morning-room, and he sat with bent head, stooping over the hearth, where the old Dutch tiles glittered with red reflections of the fire-glow.

"It is very good of you to take the disappointment so quietly," she said in her low, soothing voice.

"Oh, my dear, what is the use of raging? I stormed at him. I called him hard names. What good could that do? He must dree his weird. He may get jolly well tired of the humbug before he has had a month of it."

CHAPTER IV.

Mr. Rayner kept his word, and waited the slow results of time with an outward show of coolness, though there was fire within. From October to March was a long time to wait while that inward fire went on burning; and when March brought the promise of spring in the Park under the rich man's windows there was still no sign of relenting in the son who called wealth a crime. To the familiar friends who ventured to talk to him of Michael's spoilt career Ralph Rayner spoke lightly enough. Of course it was a disappointment that the boy should have left Oxford without taking his degree; but, after all, a degree is not the beginning and end of life, and Michael could go back. His name was being kept on the college books. He could go back to Oxford at five-and-twenty, and work, and come out high up in the lists.

"You know he's a clever chap."

Yes, everybody knew that he was clever; everybody had expected something especially brilliant in his 'Varsity career.

Rayner spoke of the Free Friar business as a whim, a flame of enthusiasm that would burn itself out.

"The thing is hardly worth talking about," he told his friends, by which they understood that he didn't want to talk about it, whereupon they expressed their sympathy by telling everybody that Rayner was hard hit.

The winter was a desolate season for the owner of Daneborough and the White House. Lady Magdalen

and Claudia were at Cannes, doing all the usual things among their own particular friends, and he who, last year, had spent December and January in the South, had no heart for golf at Napoule, baccarat at the Nautique, or yacht-racing in the Bay. He spent the greater part of the winter at Skepton, not at his brother's house, where he was cordially invited, but in his rooms at the works, where he had had one of the offices furnished as a bedroom. He gave himself up to the old working-life, the life of experiment and invention, as completely as he had done thirty years before. He had nothing to be proud of now but those dead things of steel and iron which always had seemed to him half alive. They were quite alive now, in his hours of eager work, always on the track of some new development of old methods. He had nothing else to care for, while his wife was a thousand miles away, leading a life that would have bored him if he had been with her. The sameness of it killed its charm. He knew beforehand exactly what was going to happen—the elaborate dinners, the brilliant dances, the condescensions of great people, who let him feel the immeasurable gulf of difference while they pretended perfect equality. There was always the clannish feeling, the subtle distinction that divided people who were mostly linked together by ties of blood from the man who belonged to nobody in particular.

He had never got on well with his wife's family. They had begun by trying to patronise him, which was intolerable to a man of his tremendous confidence in his own power, and they had ended by pronouncing him "impossible." In whatever assembly they met him his voice was louder than the rest, his presence more dominant, his tone more authoritative, and the worst part of it was that the man was popular. The women liked him, and the young men thought him clever. He was a splendid host, and the Park Lane parties, whether feminine and frivolous, or of the masculine dinner-eating order, were always the best of their kind. His quick perceptions overlooked no detail. He saw everything at

a glance, and had an eye like lightning to detect the weak spot in any arrangement.

"Those rout seats won't do. Take them away. There must be four rows of armchairs in front, and smaller chairs at the back, but let them be comfortable and leave room for people to move."

"But, sir, her ladyship has invited three hundred people, and chairs would only seat a hundred and fifty."

"Then let the rest of the people stay outside. They'll amuse themselves on the staircase and in the refreshment rooms. I'd rather have half my friends seated comfortably and the rest left outside, than three hundred people packed like sardines."

The upholsterer's foreman might protest that the change was impossible within the time. Whereupon Mr. Rayner would reply that the thing must be done, calling the man a good fellow, and taking him to the dining-room to make sure that he had a bumper of a certain choice old Indian sherry with his sandwich.

The tradesmen and the household liked his manners, vehement, tyrannical even, but familiar. He treated hirelings and dependents as his friends, and assumed their interest in pleasing him.

"We must make her ladyship's concert—or ball—or garden-party—a success," he would tell them.

It was always "we," as if he made himself a workman like the others.

"We're making a mess of these marquees," to the foreman from Whiteley's, who had been sent to Daneborough to superintend the arrangements. "We've got to change the position of every one of them. And that red drugget isn't good enough for the tent for the royalties. Wire to the firm for the biggest Persian carpet they can find."

He was here and there like a whirlwind, in the hours before any great festival; and when his guests arrived he was radiant, with boisterous spirits that acted upon the crowd. It was as if he set the time of a piece of music, *Allegro vivace*, even to *Presto furioso*. The parties at the White House were always gay.

He was curiously popular, and only his wife's relations and the sour few who did not like prosperity complained of him as vulgar.

He had enjoyed life in the fullest measure. Every hour had been delightful. But now all was changed. The blow that had killed his dream of the future seemed to have taken all the gladness out of the present. With a man of his sanguine temper there was no golden mean. If not exuberant he was moody; and as the months went by and there came no sign of change in Michael, not even a word of greeting at the New Year, his spirits sank into an abyss of despondency.

It happened during this inclement winter that the influenza fiend was roaming up and down the earth—like Satan in the day of Job—and among other places came to Skepton, where, in spite of sanitation considerably in advance of other towns in the West Riding, the first few scattered cases were soon followed by a house-to-house visitation in which Ralph Rayner became a victim. He had lost appetite and sleep in his depression, and his lowered vitality made him a subject for the disease, nor was his bedroom at the works a good place in which to fight the enemy, with the unskilled nursing of the doorkeeper and his wife; but before his brother, Mathew, knew of his illness he was much too ill to be moved to more comfortable quarters, and all that could be done was to instal trained nurses and telegraph the bad news to Cannes.

Pneumonia supervened, and before his wife and daughter could reach Skepton he was dangerously ill, delirious at night, but with intervals of calm and reasonableness during the day, and his first word to his wife was to tell her to write to Michael at the address he had given.

"If you tell him that his father is dying——"

"No, no, no, Ralph, you are going to get well. But I will tell him you are seriously ill, and that he must come instantly. I know his own heart would urge him to come."

"I don't know about his heart. He has his text

to guide him—'Whoso loveth father or mother more than Me——' I don't suppose a dying father would count for more than any other father in his creed."

Lady Magdalen telegraphed a long message to the care of a clergyman in South London, the friend and ally of the Free Friars, though not a member of the brotherhood. She told her son of the change his desertion had made in his father's life, and of the illness that might be fatal. The doctors were far from hopeful. The strong man, who had never known what sickness meant till now, was hovering between life and death.

Michael might be at the other end of the world, out of reach of this summons. It was one of the conditions of the altruistic life that neither distance nor difference of language or creed was to prevail against the cry for help. Famine, cholera, plague, earthquake, flood or fire, wherever calamity had crushed a suffering people the Free Friars were to be found, few as yet, but those few so indefatigable in works of mercy that they seemed many.

Michael's reply came within three hours—from Liverpool.

"I shall be with you to-night."

It was a cross-country journey, involving changes and delays on the way, but at nine o'clock Michael was sitting by his father's bed, hand clasped in hand.

His father smiled at him, a wan smile, as he murmured in a faltering voice, pitifully changed from that splendid organ which was one of Ralph Rayner's finest gifts, "Whoso loveth father or mother more than Me——"

Michael laid a gentle hand upon his father's lips.

"Do you forget how my Master cared for His mother in the hour of His agony? He counselled self-abnegation, but never the putting away of natural love."

"Ah, well, you deserted me, Mike. You gave up the father you knew for the Master you have never seen."

"If I did not believe in His reality as firmly as I

believe in yours I should be of all men most miserable. But I want you to know how dearly I love you, father. You must never doubt that."

"You came when they told you I was dying. That's something; and now I suppose you'll go away again to-morrow morning, conscious of having done your duty."

"No, no, my dear father, I shan't leave you till you're well and about again."

"Oh, then a sick father counts with you Friars, even when he happens to be a rich man."

The illness was long, with intervals of fear, and more than once Michael thought he was holding a living father's hand for the last time as he sat beside the bed, listening to the struggle for breath.

Then came the slow recovery, and, seeing his father given back to him from the jaws of death, Michael's heart melted within him.

"What's the good of my getting about again?" Rayner asked fretfully. "What's the use of fussing with doctors and nurses? You will go back to your holy poverty, and I shall have no more interest in life."

And then, in a moment of tenderness and pity for the strong man who had been brought so low, Michael surrendered.

"I'll stop with you if you really want me so much," he said; "I am bound by no vow. I will do whatever you wish, go into Parliament—anything."

"Ah! my lad, that's the cure. Doctors and nurses may go to the devil," Rayner said in a new voice, lifting himself up from his reclining attitude, with some of the old florid colour in his face and the old light in his eyes. "Do that, and you'll give me twenty years' good life. And as for your outcasts and starvelings, you shall have ample means for helping them."

"That will be only spending your money instead of spending my life. It won't count."

"Filial love—filial obedience—those will count."

Michael sighed as he thought of that transcendent life by which he and his friends had tried to shape their own, the life of the man who was not afraid to

disobey his earthly father, and break with him for ever, dead to human affection in the higher life of Divine Love. Yet it might be that the father of Francis of Assisi was a hard man, who had done little to gain a son's affection, while Michael's father had given him so much. His first abandonment of that kind father had been a severe wrench, though he left him in the pride of health and vigour; but to leave him now, a broken man, would be inhuman.

So the promise was given. "I will stay with you as long as you want me."

"That will be always, Mike."

Thus it happened that the Free Friar fell away before the end of his novitiate, to the disappointment and disgust of the little brotherhood, to whom Ralph Rayner sent his cheque for five thousand pounds by way of atonement.

The letter that thanked him for the gift told him that his son's work and influence had been of a value that could not be reckoned by money. He had the rare, the exalted qualities that go to the making of saints.

CHAPTER V.

MICHAEL went back to the world, and the world was without charm for the lad of nineteen whose dream of life was of another world, where all things were different. For some time after his renunciation all his thoughts had been of bitter regret. He hated himself for the feeble stand he had made for his Master's service. To have put his hand to the plough and taken it away at the first appeal to his affections! His father was again the strong man, dominant in his family and in society, sanguine, resolute, a conqueror. It was difficult to recall those hours when he hung between life and death, difficult to believe that his son's companionship was needful to his existence. But the son was steadfast, and kept his promise, in spite of harrowing letters from his friends in the little company of saints, heart-piercing reproaches that made him miserable.

There was no question of his going back to Oxford. His father would hardly let him out of his sight. He thought of the University as a hotbed of foolish enthusiasm, of Romanism, altruism, and Buddhism, all the isms that come between youth and its natural ambitions. Mr. Rayner only waited for his son's twenty-first birthday to plunge him into the strife of parties. Let him be Liberal, Radical, anything he liked; but let him give his talents fair play in the one arena where English youth can come quickly to the front.

"The game is for the young," he told Michael; "the new generation is pushing in at the door. I am not like Ibsen's Master-builder. I am not eaten

up by jealousy of the young. I love to think of the day when I shall take a back seat ; and dead or alive I shall always be first at Skepton. You can't touch me there."

Michael submitted, and spent his days poring over blue-books and his nights listening to debates, and sat at dinner-tables where the talk was mostly political, and where any allusion to art or literature, science or philanthropy, flashed and died, brief as the blue sparkle of an unsuccessful lucifer-match, amidst the conversation of men who could think of nothing but the political situation.

Michael listened, and schooled himself in those new interests. He went wherever his father wanted him to go, and made his friends at his father's bidding ; while all the time he was suffering from poignant regret for the nobler life he had sacrificed. It was as if he had seen a door of Heaven ajar and the light shining through, and had turned his back upon it for ever. Some good he might perhaps do in a troublous world with his father's wealth ; but he had taken back the only gift that could count, the gift of himself, the gift of a life as Saint Francis gave—wholly and irrevocably.

Suddenly, as by enchantment, that gnawing regret ceased. A miracle had happened—the miracle of love newly awakened in the heart of youth. The altruist had become all self, intensely conscious of his own existence, living in a few short autumn days a keener life than he had lived in all the years before, the quintessence of life, concentrating the emotions of years into the passion of hours. Michael Rayner was in love.

It was the end of October, the little London season, when people were in London for this or that business, passing through, or halting for a week or two between Continental travels and country-house visits.

It was in his mother's drawing-room that Michael first met the new beauty, a beauty so entirely new that she was not to be presented till the following spring. It was impressed upon people that Miss Mulliner was not "out," and that in seeing her at

tea-parties, and friendly little dinners, they were enjoying the privilege of a private view. She was like a reviewer's copy of a choice book. She was not to be published till next season. In the meantime it was something for the initiated to be able to go about talking of her to the uninitiated ; her eyes, her smile, her shoulders, the way she wore her hair.

The dusk had gathered unawares on that late October afternoon when Michael found his mother and sister and a few intimate friends—half a dozen women to one man—clustering round the hearth.

"I don't think you know my son," Lady Magdalen said to a large and stately personage with white hair under a Queen Caroline bonnet, who smiled and gave Michael her hand with exceeding graciousness.

The personage was Lady Rosina Lambourne, and sitting close at her side was her grand-daughter, the coming beauty, Lucile Mulliner.

Lady Rosina introduced Michael to the young lady, and then began to talk to him about his parliamentary aspirations, with the idea of making herself particularly pleasant.

Lucile chipped in while her grandmother was talking, and asked him if he played polo, and on his replying in the negative, enquired if football were his particular vanity.

"She has been brought up among cousins—rough creatures who haven't an idea about anything but those absurd games the newspapers are always full of nowadays."

"Absurd! Grandmother! When Rupert is a Cambridge blue, and George is to be in the 'Varsity boat next year!"

"You preposterous child, I believe you play cricket."

"Of course I play cricket, and hockey, and golf—but hockey for choice. I hope your sister is fond of cricket," graciously to Michael.

"I believe she sometimes looks on at Lord's——"

"But she doesn't play herself?"

"Does she look like it?" asked Michael, with a glance at Claudia, who was standing by a window

with the last glimmer of daylight shining on her black hair and purple gown.

"Her height would be in her favour in any game," Miss Mulliner said approvingly, and then added with a little laugh, "she certainly looks too awe-inspiring for girls' cricket. But what does she do for ekker?"

"She hunts."

"Lucky girl! I used to hunt till I was too big for my shelty, and then, good-bye hounds! Father can't afford to give me a horse."

She laughed, with a little shrug of graceful shoulders learnt from her French governess. Everything she did was graceful, and even the commonplace schoolgirl talk seemed sweet, like a young blackbird's song.

He could hardly see her face in the shadow where she sat, the light of the wood fire being hidden by an Indian screen arranged for Lady Rosina's comfort.

A footman switched on a lamp while she was talking, and Michael saw the girl who was to be his fate.

She came into his existence suddenly, and cut him loose from all the ties that held him to the past. His self-abnegation, his passionate worship of a great ideal, his dream of the perfect life, the life of sacrifice and holy poverty, had gone in a moment.

Michael was in love. A girl's face came out of the evening shadows, and in that one flash of light the heart of youth was captured. The footman moved along the room softly, switching on more lights, lamps on the tables, lamps on the piano, lamps upon the walls, and then passed into the adjoining gallery where a single switch lighted all the ceiling lamps—an instantaneous change from gloom to brightness, revealing a dazzling perspective of light and colour.

A girl's face, exquisitely youthful, soft golden hair parted simply upon a low Greek forehead, eyes of bewildering sweetness and charm, a face as pure and perfect as marble, and full of bright young life.

"Oh!" she cried, looking at the long vista beyond the dividing arch from which the curtains had been pulled back; "Oh! how quite too lovely! Grand-

mother said you would show me the tapestry—your father's wonderful tapestry. He has not had it very long, has he? Grandmother told me this house was Lord Mandeville's when she was a girl—a great, great man. You know the sort of man, one of those dry-as-dust politicians who leave interminable memoirs. But please show me the tapestry!"

She had risen, and was waiting for him to lead the way. She was exquisite in form as in face, of middle height, but so slender, so delicately made, as to appear tall—tall enough for an empress, but not too tall for a sylph. Her grey cashmere frock, the simple attire of the girl not out, became her as the leaf becomes the lily. She had some pale fluffiness of fur or plumage upon her shoulders, and a neat little grey toque with a cluster of violets.

Somebody had said that she ought to be at the Tussaud exhibition, under a glass shade. She was too lovely and too mindless for the work-a-day world.

"I am dying to see this wonderful tapestry," said Lady Rosina, rising to accompany her niece.

She had no idea of allowing Michael the privilege of a *tête-à-tête* at this stage of the acquaintance, though she had made up her mind that he was to marry Lucile, if she found him just possible. She was pleased to find that he was more than just possible; he was quite a creditable person, for whom the de Lacys—Lucile's maternal kindred—would have no reason to blush. Lady Rosina had spent the greater part of her life in France, and was in favour of marrying a girl directly she emerged from the school-room, and before she could possibly get into mischief; especially when the girl was motherless, and her father was a rake and a spendthrift, like Henry Mulliner.

The tapestry was one of Mr. Rayner's crying sins, from the standpoint of holy poverty. Fourteen thousand pounds spread over a few square yards of canvas stretched against a wall; fourteen thousand pounds' worth of antique stitchery in dull greens and duller blues and dullest browns; while in the great circle of mean suburbs and squalid slums that girdles

the richest city in the world, shabby-gentility and abject penury were living a life of slow torture for lack of shillings and pence.

But for the moment Michael forgot the sin, and was glad of the tapestry as an occasion for much childish chatter and naïve delight on Lucile's part. Had he not been spellbound he might have noticed that her admiration of this seventeenth-century needlework arose rather from the thousands it had cost than from its artistic merits or historic associations.

There was so much to see in the long gallery besides the famous Mortlake tapestry. There were miniatures, pictures, china, curios in gold and silver, ivory, enamel, jade, tortoiseshell—scattered, unconsidered wealth, of which the total would be terrible to think of for anyone who measured the sum by the necessities of those fellow-creatures lying face downwards on the close-cropped turf where the well-fed sheep may have wondered at them, as masses of ugliness that could hardly be made of the same clay as those radiant beings who spread their silken skirts in the glad light of the Sunday parade, human peacocks, dazzling, expensive, self-satisfied.

No one thought of poverty's monstrous growth this evening, while Lady Rosina criticised with knowledge and taste, and Lucile gushed and admired.

Every other visitor had vanished, and Lady Magdalen was yawning over a book, when they went back to the drawing-room. The inspection of the Rayner treasures had lasted an hour, and Michael's fate was sealed.

Young, intelligent, quiet and unobtrusive, and rich beyond the dreams of a dowager—for to a connoisseur those art-treasures gave the measure of the Rayner millions. What more could be desired for a dowerless girl? There was no bachelor duke, not even a marquis, or a particularly eligible earl, in the matrimonial market just then, for Lord Frankland had distinction and vast acres, but no cash; so it was to be an easy win for Michael. He was not wanted to make the running for sombeody else, or to mark time till the beginning of the season. He was allowed free access to Lady Rosina's cosy little house in

Clarges Street, and he was engaged to Lucile within three weeks of their first meeting, to the wild delight of his father, who only now could rest assured that the ghost of Saint Francis of Assisi was properly laid, and to the perfect content of Lady Magdalen.

Claudia was not enraptured with her brother's choice, though she was glad that he had done with the Franciscans, and was going to marry and live like a Christian, as she called it; that is to say, live in Mayfair with an expensive establishment, and migrate southward in January. But the divinity, the girl, who, by the mere fashion of her face, the mere sound of her voice, had wrought the spell, seemed a rather poor creature to Claudia.

"If Michael wanted a pretty fool he has got the wife of his choice," she said to her mother, but she was too fond of her brother to drop one grain of bitter into his cup of sweetness. It was enough to know that he was passionately in love with this pretty person, and that he was saved from the Free Friars. There were no impediments, no delays, and Sir Henry Mulliner's large ideas of a settlement were so freely accepted by Mr. Rayner that he felt sorry he had not asked for more.

"I opened my mouth pretty wide," he told a friend at his club, "but, by Jove! sir, I ought to have opened it wider. The man is almost as infatuated with my girl as the boy is—but, of course, it's a bit of a lift for a manufacturer's son to hook himself on to the de Lacys."

The de Lacys were one of those ancient houses whose ramifications spread themselves over half the peerage, and whose influence is supposed to be in proportion to the extent of their connections. To put the de Lacy influence into action was like moving a world; but the de Lacys did not move easily. They had to be quite sure that it was worth while.

It was Ralph Rayner's large way of looking at money that made him accede to Sir Henry's somewhat exorbitant demands, but he was not unmindful of the benefits to be obtained from that potent family.

"I want nothing for myself," he told Michael, in their confidential talk. "My life is done. I have lived hard, lived every moment, worked at business, worked at pleasure. The strain has never been relaxed. I am fifty-seven, and my life is done. The remnant that remains isn't worth thinking about. It will be Brighton—or Nice—and a bath-chair. I have had most things that the world can give; but I want better things for you, Mike—more consideration, a higher status, a purer atmosphere, out of the stink of trade, out of the scramble for gold."

Michael told his father that he wanted nothing but the girl of his choice, a simple, not too costly life, a small house modestly furnished, a small establishment, a one-horse brougham.

"You know my sentiments about the use of money."

"Damn your sentiments! You'll have to live as she likes, my boy, not as you like. You'll have to please her, and satisfy her people. Don't let Lady Rosina hear you talk about one-horse broughams. We are to meet Lucile and the old lady in Long Acre on Monday morning and choose a couple of motors. And Lucile wants a Park phaeton with a pair of cobs. Her father tells me she's a very good whip."

"She has never driven anything but a governess-cart," said Michael.

"Perhaps not; but she has done with governess-carts now. Do you think she is going to marry you in order to live in Bloomsbury, and go about London in a one-horse brougham? The pretty little puss knows her own value. She'll want to be a peeress before she's ten years older; and her family interest, backed by my money, will get you a peerage as easy as lying."

* * * * * *

They were married early in the year, and went to the South for a honeymoon that was to last till the English climate was endurable for millionaires. Mr. Rayner had given Lucile her choice of a wedding-present, and she had chosen a yacht, which was to be big and very comfortable, and above all, very pretty, but which

need not be quite as large as the *Catania* or the *Giralda*, she had added graciously.

The father-in-law smiled, and gave twelve thousand pounds for a steam yacht built by another commercial millionaire, who had wearied of his toy; for which gift Lucile stood on tip-toe, and kissed him lightly on each cheek, with lips that fluttered for a moment, as if only a butterfly's wing had touched him.

Lucile had never been in Italy, and, in fact, had hardly been anywhere out of the shabby old country-house where she had been brought up, and her grandmother's house in an adjoining county. She had been nowhere and she wanted to go everywhere, had seen nothing and wanted to see everything. She had long arrears of dull days and shabby frocks to make up for; and in her pretty caressing way she was insatiable.

Those first few weeks on the Mediterranean, now on sea and now on land, were weeks of enchantment for the young lover, in love with youth and beauty. The loveliness of the world they were living in, the dazzling light, the glorious colour, seemed only Lucile's atmosphere. It was she who made the world so delicious; balmy climate, light and colour, were but an effusion from her exquisite personality.

That she was trivial and empty-headed, selfish and self-indulgent, were facts he only discovered gradually, and acknowledged to himself most reluctantly. Then, and only then, did he realise the stern truth that he had fallen in love with the perfection of a face, while of the mind that belonged to the face he had sought to know nothing. He awoke as from a blissful dream, brought back from fairyland to the hard, bleak world of reality, and his heart sickened in the agony of disillusion.

And then, with love undiminished, he told himself that she was little more than a child, and that all that was wanting in her character would come to her with the ripening years, and the sense of responsibility. It was for him to help her to form her character. She had been given to him in her undisciplined youth, lovely and guileless, taking no thought for the morrow,

with a childish joy in the pleasure of the hour, and the incapacity of a child to think about other people.

She had wearied of those lovely shores before the end of March, so the yacht was sent back to England, and Lucile and her husband went on to Italy, moving from place to place, to gratify her eagerness for new things. Florence, Venice, Rome, Naples—she wanted to see everything—palaces, cathedrals, ruins, pictures, and gardens; but nothing interested her for any length of time. She had no intervals of repose. She liked people better than pictures or scenes of natural beauty, and thought more of some smartly-dressed American girls whom they met at Pompeii, than of all that was shown her in that city of Death. No one but a lover-husband on a honeymoon journey would have supported her caprices; and Michael went back to England worn out by the rush of those last few weeks between Naples and Marseilles.

Then came the London season, which was a greater rush than the Italian tour; for now the de Lacy family in all its ramifications came to the front, and the lovely Mrs. Michael Rayner became a personage in that little world whose outermost boundary is Bryanston Square on the north and Cadogan Square on the south.

Lucile was the fashion, and the house in Curzon Street was crowded with the best people, who came to hear Plançon sing, or Kubelik play, and to look at the beautiful hostess. It was a charming house, furnished without count of cost by Ralph Rayner, and even the de Lacy clan praised and admired; but Lucile found fault with drawing-rooms that would not hold a hundred people in comfort.

"It's a darling house," she told her father-in-law, "but the rooms are impossibly wee."

"The rent's big enough, anyhow, missy."

"Papa, don't be vulgar! It's so easy to be vulgar. I was talking of the size of the rooms. What has that to do with the rent?"

"Something! You might have a wilderness in Russell Square for a quarter of the money."

"Money, money, money!" echoed Lucile. "People are always talking of money."

She had no definite notion of Russell Square, but imagined it in that outer London where the poor lived.

"And if it comes to small rooms, missy, your grandmother's drawing-room in Clarges Street ain't as big as Westminster Hall."

"Oh, papa, that's very cheap," she said reprovingly, and then she stood on tip-toe and touched his beard with one of her airy kisses.

"You'll get us a bigger house next year, won't you, paparetto?" she whispered.

"Michael must find a marked contrast between you and his other bride," Mr. Rayner said somewhat grimly.

"His other bride! Had he a wife before me?"

"The Lady Poverty. I think he called her his bride—in the time of his philanthropic craze."

"When he wanted to imitate St. Francis? Wasn't it too silly of him? He dragged me to Assisi to see churches, and some dreadful dead men in a crypt—a day of appalling boredom. Everlasting churches, and relics and trumpery, and a huge convent. He went back and stayed there for three days, leaving me at Florence with the Marchesa Romagni."

There was a touch of remonstrance in the father-in-law's tone, and the time came when even the adoring husband remonstrated.

Cards and dressmakers' bills had emptied Lucile's banking account. Her pin-money was two thousand a year, and a thousand had been paid since her wedding day; but the account was overdrawn, and she brought a sheaf of bills to Michael with smiling apologies. She had no idea things were so expensive.

The cost of her finery was startling to a man who had worked among the poor of London, and was familiar with the measure of money.

"Lucile, it is iniquitous to spend so much on clothes."

She stood before him unabashed, ethereal in her loose morning-gown, a thing of lace and chiffon and gauzy

ribbon, light as the foam of a waterfall, and perhaps suggested by the whiteness of rushing water.

"It is wicked to spend hundreds of pounds upon things like that," he said, looking at her severely.

She was astonished, and deeply offended.

"Iniquitous! wicked! Nice words to use to your wife—because of a few trumpery bills. What is the good of your father being the richest man in London, or one of the richest, if you are to grudge me a frock or two? Of course one has to dress like other people."

"Like other people!" he echoed. "Like a handful of brainless women who vie with each other in wastefulness. Would you like to see how some other people dress—God's creatures—fashioned as wonderfully as you and your friends? Look here!"

He opened a drawer in his desk, and took out a packet of photographs, snap-shots taken in one of the poorest of those ghastly slums where his feet had so often trodden. Snap-shots of women and children in their scanty rags, gaunt, lean, half naked.

"That is the fashionable dress in some places I know, Lucile. Do you like to think you have often spent as much upon one gown as would buy comfortable clothes for all those?"

He spread the photographs before her, pointing to the pitiable figures. She looked at them earnestly for half a minute, and he thought her heart was touched. Then with an impetuous movement she gathered them into a heap and flung them into the fire.

"There, that's the only thing to be done with them," she said. "You have no right to torture me with such loathsome sights."

"Pray forgive me. I want to awaken your conscience."

"My conscience! Isn't it rather mean to drag in conscience about a twopenny-halfpenny bill or two? When I married a rich man I never thought I was to be worried about an expensive frock. I thought you would be proud of my nice clothes."

"I am proud of your beauty—but that is not

enhanced by fantastic finery—the Pelion on Ossa of your man-milliner's taste. Look at the old portraits, Lucile, the Vandykes, the Gainsboroughs, and you will see that women can be dressed sumptuously without squandering money upon fripperies that no artist would condescend to paint."

"And when sumptuous simplicity is in fashion I will imitate Henrietta Maria; but in the meantime I must dress like my friends. If you were a duke I might strike out a style of my own and be splendidly simple; but the utmost your wife can hope for is to be one of the first to get the new things from Paris. If you can't let me do that you may as well bury me alive in Derbyshire."

She said this with a graceful lightness that made the words less ugly than they might have sounded from another kind of woman; but she left Michael brooding sadly as he sat at his desk in the chilly den that was all the master of the house had for his own uses, a small room, within sound of the servants' voices in an adjacent pantry, a room that was cold in May, with one large square window that the sun never shone upon, and for prospect the dead wall at the back of the stables.

How hard she was under that seeming lightness, how inaccessible to pity! Why had she married him? Was it only because he had a father who reckoned money by hundreds and thousands, where other men counted by tens? Carried along by the swift current of a young man's passion he had taken her love for granted. She had seemed so responsive to his ardent wooing. There had been no hesitation, no delay, no pause in which family influence might have been brought to bear upon her decision. The lovely head had sunk upon his breast with a childlike abandonment when the words of love were spoken, the slender form had suffered his imprisoning embrace; and when he pleaded for a speedy marriage she had yielded so sweetly to his wish that he could not doubt her love. It seemed only natural that a love like his should awaken a responsive passion in her young heart. In his inexperience of social life, the possibility of

mercenary motives never entered his mind. Lucile mercenary? Lucile caring more for his father's wealth than for himself? The idea would have seemed outrageous. A woman of thirty, worn out by the disappointments of several London seasons, might be keen to make a rich marriage, and indifferent about the husband; but what could Lucile know of money, a girl of eighteen, newly escaped from school-room and French governess?

It would have astonished him if, in a retrospective vision, he could have heard governess and pupil discussing the chances of marriage and a fine establishment, as they tramped the uninteresting country road or sat by the schoolroom fire. It would have been startling to see the bright face flush with pleasure as Lucile recited the things she meant to have when she married—the house, the carriages, the opera-box, the villa at Cannes, the winters in Ceylon, Egypt, India, whichever place was most *chic* at the moment. It would have chilled him to see her gloating over fashion magazines, reading about fine parties and expensive clothes, at the age when nice girls are reading Scott and Dickens, or to see her dancing backwards and forwards in front of the old-fashioned cheval glass, and appraising the power of her beauty.

Was it her father's teaching that had killed all the innocence and grace of girlhood?

"Upon my soul, Luce, you're a clipper; and if your old grannie plays her cards properly you'll make a fine marriage."

That had been Sir Henry Mulliner's benediction on his only child's seventeenth birthday.

The vision of life passed before Michael's brooding eyes as he sat alone by the low fire, while the cry of a hawker in a slum behind the mews sounded like the lamentation of a lost soul. The vision of a life that might have been, in contrast with the life that was. Those exalted feelings of last year, the rapture of inspired moments that brought him into communion with his Redeemer, the exaltation of hours in which he had raised the sick from the bed of death, or comforted the dying, or fed the hungry children, or

counselled and taught the ignorant mothers, awakening dull and tired hearts and brains to a sense of maternal duty. He thought of that brotherhood with want and sorrow, that glad consciousness of being a friend and helper, an ardent unwearying disciple of the joyous and gentle saint whose life was one long sacrifice of all things that are dear to common clay.

The life that might have been was a life of noble aims, the wide-reaching work of the pilgrim whose unresting steps carry comfort and hope to the dark unknown abodes. Remembering this, Michael reckoned the joys of the life that was.

He was Mrs. Michael Rayner's husband. That was his office and profession. He was the husband of quite the prettiest among the pretty people; and in this subordinate position he found himself in universal request at all the best houses in London. Lucile had been too carefully trained by Lady Rosina to make any mistake as to best and worst in the houses over whose threshold those light feet stepped. It was only in houses that had the proper cachet that Mrs. Michael Rayner was to be met.

"I am not going to gyrate in a circle of millionaires," she said to her father-in-law, when he was huffed with her for refusing an invitation to a ball given by an old friend's wife. "In our position we ought to keep clear of the money set. Of course, Lady Magdalen's parties are always perfect—and I shall never refuse anything of hers!"

"I hope you won't, my dear," Mr. Rayner answered grimly.

His manner to this exquisite daughter-in-law had changed somewhat of late. He no longer doated upon her as the fairy who had given life and liberty to the enchanted Prince. He was not altogether happy about his son. The figure that followed the pretty Mrs. Michael Rayner into the drawing-rooms of the great, and stood silent and aloof while she was the centre of a gay crowd, was not a satisfactory figure for the eyes of a father who had concentrated all his hopes upon his son. People had noticed the gloomy face, the absent manner, the startled glance

on being spoken to, as of a man awakened from a dream. People had noticed how Michael Rayner would sit through a long dinner without eating or drinking, or with such a poor pretence of eating as seemed indispensable. At breakfast his wife was too busy with her letters and engagements and plans for the pleasures of the day to observe that he had taken to breakfasting on dry bread.

People began to say that there was something not quite right about young Rayner—that particular mode of speech being rather less ill-natured than it would have been to say that there was something wrong. It was uncomfortable to see him going about with his wife, and, considering his father's money, it was a pity he didn't do something to keep himself alive—start a racing-stable, or rent a deer-forest. What could one hope from a young man who cared neither for horses nor cards ?

"And it isn't as if he had anything to complain of," people said. "He's got the prettiest wife in London, and she don't flirt."

In that respect, at least, Lucile's conduct left nothing to be desired ; for as she loved no one as well as she loved Lucile, the temptations that wreck some women had no power over her.

For Michael disillusion meant despair. He was like a child who had given up a happy jaunt with his mother for the sake of some alluring toy, and who had found out the worthlessness of it when his mother was gone, and he lay on the nursery-floor alone with his broken drum, disconsolate, having chosen the worser part. After half a year of wedlock Michael knew that he had chosen the worser part, when he left the life he had been living for his fellow-men to live the life for self.

He had not given up all hope of Lucile without many vain efforts to bring her into sympathy with his own views about conscience and humanity ; but such efforts generally ended in something very like a quarrel, something that widened the gulf between them and made him feel utterly alone.

Again he had to remonstrate with her about her

extravagance; another sheaf of bills, some forgotten last time, some that had accrued since; and again she called him mean for making a fuss about money. And then came the old plea which always made her angry.

"Consider what all this money might have done for the poor."

"That is exactly what I am not going to think about. I suppose if I considered the poor I ought to go through the year with two tailor-gowns and a straw hat, and allow myself to be pointed at as the millionaire's mad daughter-in-law. Really, Michael, this fuss is a little too absurd. As for the poor, there is a great deal too much done for them nowadays. I am sick to death of the bazaars where people plague me to buy rubbish I don't want, and absolutely hate. It's too preposterous to talk as you do. Don't you subscribe to all the things?"

"Subscribe! Money! Half of which is spent on postage-stamps and stationery and offices, paid secretary, paid collectors. It is himself that a man must give if he wants to be like Christ; his time, his thoughts, his labour, his pity for the suffering he sees with his own eyes, and can understand. Subscribe! Yes, I give them my money; but I have shut the door of my heart against them."

He paced the little room—to which she only came in her financial difficulties—distressed and indignant. She had a heart of stone—this woman for whose sake he had renounced the solemn purpose of his life, and forsaken his friends.

"To take back the gift from the altar," he muttered, moving restlessly to and fro, cramped by the small space, like a captive beast out of the wilderness. "To dedicate my life to God and humanity, and to turn renegade!"

Then with a sudden rush of passionate feeling he stopped and faced her as she stood before him in her girlish loveliness, a little scared by his vehemence, and yet defying him; and at the sight of the face that had enchanted him, the exquisite form in a cloud of lace and chiffon, with diamonds that flashed

rainbow light from her hair and neck, the glamour of a young man's love came back to him. He caught her in his arms and kissed her passionately.

"Killing myself to die upon a kiss," he said. "I have killed my better self for you, Lucile, killed my hopes and my endeavours, my fight against evil, my labour for good. Give me something for my sacrifice, give me something for my love. Awaken me from this bad dream—the dream that you have never loved me, that you married me for the sake of the things I loathe—the wanton luxury of this house, the jewels on your neck, the aimless life we have been leading since our wedding-day. Tell me that you have a heart and a mind, that there are wise and kind thoughts behind that lovely forehead."

"Please let me go," she answered frowningly. "You can't make amends for rudeness by demonstrations of this kind. You have absolutely ruined my tulle berthe, and I have no time to get it put right again, for the carriage will be at the door in a minute. If you talk and act so wildly, Michael, I shall begin to think—you are—not quite—sane."

She spoke the last few words very slowly, and looked at him with a strange expression between fear and disgust. Her maid brought her cloak, and Michael followed her meekly to the carriage, to play his moody part in an entertainment he hated. It was a dinner of forty guests, all young people, with a dance to follow, six hours that seemed an eternity to Michael Rayner.

It was the last entertainment at which they appeared together. After that night Michael shut himself in his den at the back of the house, and his wife had to go about with the bevy of friends who were always pleased to have Mrs. Michael Rayner in their train. She was still the new beauty, admired, talked about, not for any scandal in the way of flirtations, not for any whisper of that compendious phrase "carrying on," but for her pretty airs and graces, her extravagance, and her evident estrangement from the young and doting husband. People had heard about the

Free Friars, and wondered that the *ménage* had lasted even for the brief space of a London season.

It was the Goodwood week, and Lucile spent three days at a great house within ten miles of the Ducal Park, where she was one of the attractions of the house-party.

Before leaving home she went to her husband's room, dressed for the journey, her maid waiting in the hall.

She found him sitting half buried in a great arm-chair, pale and wan, with his hands lying idle on the arms of the chair, his eyes looking straight before him in a settled melancholy—no open book, no manuscript or letters upon his desk, nothing to indicate occupation of any kind—only the aspect of a man who had nothing to do in the world but to think of the things he had lost.

"I hope you don't mind my going alone, Michael," she said, with a conciliating air.

"Going? Where?"

"I told you last night. To the Strangfords, for Goodwood. The Duchess is letting me go with her party—since you are too ill to go with me."

"Who said I was ill?"

"I thought——" she faltered.

"I am not ill. I want to be alone. Nothing more. Only to be alone."

He had not looked at her once during this brief colloquy. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, or on that vision of something that is not, which the over-wrought brain sees when the actual things of this trivial life are darkened.

The maid came to the door.

"You won't be in time at Victoria if you don't come this moment, ma'am."

"Good-bye, Michael," Lucile said, hurrying away, with a flutter of white silk dust cloak and muslin skirts.

She came back at the end of the week, flushed with success. Her turf ventures had been lucky, and she had been a winner at bridge. Her frocks and hats had been the smartest, and the best men had been

captives at her chariot-wheels. It was her first Goodwood, and the weather had been faultless. She felt that heaven need be no better than this, a place of green lawns, and sunshine, and sweet air, and an admiring crowd.

She came home meaning to be quite civil—nay, even affectionate—to her husband; but she found that there was an abyss between them. She could not understand him, and she was beginning to be afraid of him.

He was shut in his room, and he looked just as he had looked when she bade him good-bye. She could almost believe that he had been sitting there all the time, a limp and nerveless figure, with a pallid face and fixed eyes.

"Are you coming to luncheon, Michael? I want to tell you all about Goodwood. I have had a ripping time. Everybody was no end of kind. Do come!"

"No, I am not coming. I want to be alone."

"That was what you said on Tuesday. Why are you shutting yourself up like this? What have I done to offend you?"

"Not much. You are you. It is not your offence but my own that I have to expiate."

"I don't understand. Oh! Michael, I wish you wouldn't be eccentric. I hate eccentricity."

"I want to be alone. Can't you understand?"

"Oh, I see! It has something to do with your religion, I suppose. What the Roman Catholics call a retreat."

"Yes—a retreat. If you can't leave me to myself I shall have to go away."

Something in her shallow soul—the girl's natural longing to be loved even where she had given so little love—brought her to his feet. She sat on the ground and laid her head upon his knee, the exquisite face, the rich hair, all that he had worshipped, the lorelei charms for which he had given up his portion with the saints, his dedication of himself to suffering humanity. He glanced at her for a moment with eyes that instantly resumed their far-off gaze. The spell was broken.

"Michael," she cried passionately, "have you left off loving me?"

"Yes."

She sprang to her feet in a tempest of anger. Her worshipper, her slave, dared to renounce his allegiance. Flushed with victory, assured that she was the prettiest person in a society that was rich in beauty, her husband, the man who had such reason to adore her, such reason to be proud of her, could calmly tell her that she had lost his love.

"Now I know you are quite mad," she said, as she walked out of the room, with her head reared, like Lamia's glittering crest.

She really thought he was mad, a harmless kind of lunacy, religious monomania. Well, let him shut himself up and pray, and read the Bible, and satiate himself with pious meditation. He would come out of his retirement in a few days, most likely, and be again her lover-husband. If he did not she would have to talk to his father, and there would be brain-doctors brought in, and a horrible fuss, and Michael might have to go away somewhere—under restraint. Horrible phrase! And people would talk. She hated the idea of it, and clung to the hope that she would have him at her feet in a day or two, adoring and praising her, as in the dawn of their honeymoon. The brief estrangement ought to make him fonder than ever.

She was awakened in the dead of night by a strange sound overhead. The sound came from her husband's dressing-room on the third floor, the room where he had a pallet bed which he had occupied of late. In Curzon Street a rent of seven hundred a year does not predicate spacious premises, and there was not space enough on the second floor for the husband's dressing-room, as well as the wife's bedroom, bathroom, and morning-room.

What was that strange sound—rhythmical, repeated again and again? Lucile looked at the watch-clock on the table by her bed, in the light of the electric lamp.

Three o'clock.

A strange recurrent sound—something that swished and whistled like the shriek of a furious wind—but not so loud. She listened till she could bear it no more, and then she sprang out of bed, flung on her dressing-gown, and ran with naked feet up the softly-carpeted stairs, to her husband's door. She tried to open the door, but it was locked. The strange noise had ceased.

"Michael, let me in," she cried. "What are you doing?"

He opened the door, and stood facing her, in his long white bath-gown, pale to the lips, and with beads of sweat upon his forehead, a ghastly figure.

"What do you want?" he asked angrily.

"I want to know what you are doing? That dreadful noise frightened me. What is it, Michael? I insist upon knowing! What is it?"

"Nothing that concerns you. Go back to bed. You told me that I was mad. Leave your mad husband to himself."

He shut the door before she could answer him, and double-locked it. She went back to her room crying and shivering, though the air of the July dawn was soft and warm.

"I must tell his father," she thought; but there was a great deal going on in that last week of the season—a great ball at a great house, and two special dinner-parties made up hastily to meet foreign princes—and she was wanted at them both. She had sent the invitation cards to Michael by his valet, and he had scrawled across each: "Accept for yourself—not for me."

She must put off talking to his father till the last of the parties was over, or she might find it impossible to appear at them. If once the doctors were in the house her life would be chaos.

She came home very late on the following nights, and she heard no repetition of the strange noise in her husband's bedroom. Whether she slept too soundly after her parties—dinner—opera—dance—to be conscious of any noise in the upper room, or whether the sound did not recur, she was able to

sleep in peace. She went about her strenuous business of pleasure for three days without seeing Michael; but on the fourth morning she paid him a duty visit in his study.

She followed the servant who carried a breakfast-tray, tea, and a small rack of thin toast.

"Oh, Michael, is that all your breakfast?" she exclaimed. "Hardly enough for a sparrow."

"It is all I want."

"But you are starving yourself. I asked Martin about your dinners, and he would hardly answer me. I couldn't get anything out of him. You are starving yourself. You have grown horribly thin."

And then as she went nearer him, the table having been between them at first, she saw his hands wrapped in linen bandages.

"Good heavens! what is the matter?" she cried. "How have you hurt your hands?"

"It is of no consequence—to you. They will heal soon enough."

"Was it an accident? How did it happen?"

She was really concerned for him. The wounds of the spirit left her cold, but she could be compassionate about physical pain.

"It was not an accident. Pray leave me to myself," he said sternly. "How many times must I tell you that I want to be left alone?"

She went away in tears, and had hard work to prevent herself from weeping to an extent that might have prevented her being in perfect beauty at the most important of the two special dinner-parties.

It was that night, or, perhaps, after the dawn, in the pale summer morning, that the accident happened which made the pretty Mrs. Rayner the most eligible of widows, and gave Sir Henry Mulliner reason to congratulate himself upon his forethought in asking for so handsome a settlement.

Michael had bought a revolver about a month before—a purchase which he had taken the trouble to mention in a letter to his mother.

"There have been a good many jewel robberies in Mayfair lately, and the back of our house would be

rather an easy problem for a burglar, so I have bought the very latest and best thing in revolvers, which I shall keep in my dressing-room ready for use."

That letter was remembered after Michael's death.

Lady Magdalen's martyrdom had begun, and she and Claudia had been together at Daneborough for nearly two months when the tragedy happened. When could Claudia ever forget the fatal morning when the incumbent of the church that Ralph Rayner had built in his park, a well-meaning person, who had been a frequent visitor since the beginning of Lady Magdalen's illness, came to her with the news of her son's death? Her husband was in London, distracted, almost a madman, but he had been just able to telegraph to the parson at Daneborough: "Our son has met his death by an accident; go to my wife and give her what comfort you can."

Michael's statement about the purchase of a revolver was read at the inquest, and was sufficiently convincing to the coroner and jury, had they been inclined to doubt that the young man's death was accidental; but there were others, his father among them, who saw in those lines a precautionary measure to spare the feelings of his kindred. His father had seen too many indications of mental disorder within the last few weeks of that brief life, and even before the fatal end he had blamed himself for coming between his son and that which Michael had called his "vocation."

Fanaticism, delusion, the repetition of ancestral history! Michael's revolt against the splendours and luxuries that other young men take for granted was but another phase of the monomania which had made Manuela bent on abandoning husband and children and home for the living death of a Carmelite nun. It was the same madness, and had ended like hers in blood; but in each case the catastrophe might have been brought about by the struggle between affection and will, the resolute purpose of self-sacrifice that to the fanatic seems a call from God.

Ralph Rayner's heart was broken. He was kind and devoted in his attention to his suffering wife, and was

seldom absent from Daneborough while she lived. But when the curtain fell upon that melancholy scene it seemed as if his home-life was ended. He had his iron town still, and he had the manufacturing world in Europe and America to explore. This man, who had ceased to care for the things that money can buy, was still keen in the pursuit of commercial success. To be the first in his own particular line was the only thing left him; and he meant to carry on the fight against competitors, home and foreign, so long as he had a brain that could think and a will that could govern men. Henceforth that was all that remained to him, a commercial success unparalleled in his own particular line, and a colossal fortune. To add to his wealth, to pile up money, was the one thing real in a life where all things that money cannot buy are transient and fleeting. He cared for the money because it was the symbol of success and all he had achieved, from the day he left the middle-class public school, where he had been a leader of boys, the captain of the football team, to become a leader of men.

His capacity for domestic love had ended with the loss of his wife. He had never cared for Claudia, and he loved her less after Michael's death. Her strong character was repellent to him. She was too self-assured, too resolute, for a woman. And lurking in the background of his ideas about his daughter there was always the thought that she ought to have been the son. Her mind and temperament might have helped him to realise all his dreams of greatness, had she been in Michael's place. It was pitiful that the boy should have inherited, with the Rayner features and colouring, the mental characteristics of a maternal ancestress.

CHAPTER VI.

Mr. Rayner arrived in Park Lane in the late evening, three days after Lord Frankland's visit. He had come from Skepton on his way to New York. He had got wind of a new development in some iron works at Pittsburg, and he was "running across," as he called it, to look into the matter. He trusted no eye but his own about anything that touched his business.

There was a question that he wanted to settle with Claudia before he left England, since he might be tempted to prolong his absence, to run down to San Francisco, then to Mexico and South America, and later to Japan and China. Shortly after her mother's death he had told her that she must have a chaperon. It would be impossible for her to live alone either at Daneborough or in London. Some irreproachable widow or spinster of a suitable age must be found to live with her, a kind of lady-in-waiting.

"A Mrs. General, to look after the 'prunes and prism' side of my life," Claudia said shudderingly. "Oh, how horrible that will be! A strange woman always about the rooms—a pushing, tiresome, officious woman—who will be too conscientious to live her own life and let me live mine. Must I have such an encumbrance?"

"Yes, it is inevitable. But I don't think she need make much difference. You are strong-minded enough to take your own way if your chaperon were a dragon of dragons. You will find a paid chaperon easy to manage. Your mother had troops of poor relations. Perhaps you might find the kind of person among some of them."

"They could provide a regiment of companions, not objecting to travel. Aunt Louisa offered herself to my mother for Cannes the year before last. Well, I would rather have someone of my mother's blood than a stranger. But let me have a year to myself—my year of mourning. I shall visit no one, receive no one; and I have old Mary to look after me."

Old Mary was a favourite maid of Lady Magdalen's, a comfortable, homely person, who had been second nursemaid in Lord Altrincham's family in her early girlhood, and had looked after the baths and sponges, and who had filled the same office in Claudia's nursery.

Mr. Rayner had allowed his daughter this reprieve, but now the year was over and he would permit no further delay.

Claudia was coldly submissive.

"If I must have a sheep-dog, it had better be my Aunt Louisa," she said; "I believe she would not mind living with me."

"Mind! I should think not. This house would be a good deal better than her miserable little fifth-floor flat in Westminster."

"*C'est selon!* In her place I should prefer the fifth floor to anybody else's house."

"Lady Louisa is not romantic. I will call upon her to-morrow. You may consider that matter settled."

"You have such an off-hand way of doing things."

"I like to do things quickly if they have to be done. The terms I shall offer your aunt will make everything easy."

Father and daughter were in the smoking-room, whither Claudia had come at his summons, a room too spacious for a solitude of two, and full of shadows, for only a few of the lights had been switched on. The furniture was of the ponderous and gloomy order that is a convention for smoking-rooms—massive oak, olive-green morocco, a Turkey carpet of sombre colouring, and olive-green velvet curtains screening deeply recessed lattices of leaded glass.

It was past ten o'clock, Mr. Rayner having arrived

unexpectedly after Claudia's dinner, to be regaled with a plate of soup and a mutton-chop in his monumental dining-room.

"Lady Louisa will do very well," he said meditatively, after a thoughtful silence, and then with the air of a man who forces himself to do something that hurts him, "I suppose you know that Michael's death has made you a great heiress?"

"I have never thought about money."

"You had better begin to think about it now. A vast fortune is a vast responsibility. You will have to train yourself in the management of business, before you are the owner of all my ironworks, and the rest of the Skepton property. An estate like that is a kingdom, and requires a wise ruler."

"Pray do not talk about it. You are still in the prime of life—and who knows? some day you may meet a woman you would like to marry. Dearly as I loved my mother I should not wonder, nor take it to heart, if you were to give me a step-mother. I might wish to keep out of her way, but I should bear her no ill will."

"You need have no fear of a stepmother. I want no infant-heir. I centred all my hopes in your brother. I couldn't begin again. You must think seriously of your future position, Claudia. I have lost my love of life, and I doubt if any man can live to old age when that is gone."

"But you are so strong, so full of health and vitality. You ought to live to be ninety."

"God forbid! I can get on somehow as long as I keep moving, but the day I stop work it will be all over with me."

And then, after a silence, and a cigar half smoked, he said, "I went to my club for an hour before I came home—and I ran against Frankland. He told me he had called upon you."

"Yes?"

"And he told me what he had come for, and that you had refused him—finally."

"I hope you are not displeased with me on that account," she said.

"On the contrary, if you had accepted him, I should have had to interfere—unpleasantly."

"I did not know that you disliked Lord Frankland."

"I like him immensely. He is a good fellow, and is bound to do well—to be prime minister perhaps before he dies. But neither Frankland nor any other man must be your husband. There must be no more of your mother's race, Claudia!"

"Do you mean because of my brother's death?"

"Because of your brother's madness—which was his inheritance from your mother."

"Was there ever a saner woman than my mother?"

"She had escaped—but the strain was there—and it blighted her son's life."

"A vain, empty-headed girl blighted his life—nothing else!"

"He was unlucky in his marriage; but he was a madman when he came to Daneborough and told me that he had joined a band of fanatics. Yes, it was Lucile's fault that he killed himself. A good wife would have saved him. I hoped everything from his marriage; but the madness was there, the madness of a hundred years ago."

And then he told her the history of her unhappy ancestress, the woman from whose Spanish-American blood she had inherited her blue-black hair and those splendid eyes that had scared away bashful admirers sometimes, without her knowing of their admiration or their fear. She never took her eyes from her father's countenance while he talked to her, but her own face showed no emotion. Coldly and calmly she heard the story to the end, with no futile interruptions.

"I am not in the least afraid of going out of my mind," she said when he was silent.

"There must be no more of our race."

"So be it. I don't believe I shall ever wish to marry. I have seen no one yet I should care to call my husband. Lord Frankland is the best. I might have accepted him, perhaps, if I had not known that he was influenced by my money."

"Of course. No man will ever propose to you who

will not be influenced by your money. You will be too rich for it to be possible you could be considered apart from your money. If you are a wise woman you will not wish to marry; and so far as I have power to prevent your marriage I shall use that power. There must be no more of our race."

The sentence was repeated in a voice of deepest gloom, and it struck like a knell upon Claudia's heart; yet she had no desire to be any man's wife, and had made up her mind to live alone and unfettered. She had refused Lord Frankland, whom she liked, and with whose ambitions she could have sympathised.

"I shall be quite satisfied to end my life as a spinster," she said quietly.

Mr. Rayner had only left himself one clear day in London before he was due at Southampton, to take his place on the monster liner that was to carry him to New York. He dined *tête-à-tête* with his daughter on his last evening, and his tone was kinder than usual, as if the idea of leaving her for an indefinite period had softened him a little.

"I called on Lady Louisa this afternoon, and arranged everything," he said. "She will come to you to-morrow. You can settle with Vickers about the rooms she is to have. I have promised her a sitting-room facing the Park, as she says she can't live without sunshine. There is plenty of room for her."

"Yes, there is plenty of room," assented Claudia, with grim thoughts of the great empty rooms that had been full of people and gaiety in her mother's time, before a little procession of carriages drove Lady Magdalen and her maids and pets and belongings to the Midland Railway on the sad journey that was to be the last. Lady Magdalen had adored the White House. It had satisfied all her desires, her ideas as to the fitness of things.

"I never realised that you were rich till you brought me here," she sometimes told her husband.

And on that exquisite midsummer morning, in the height of the season, with West-end London looking like a garden-party of happy people, she had to leave

the things she loved and to go in hot haste to Daneborough, to hide her misery.

"I couldn't endure London," she said, "now I *know*. People would come day after day to enquire about me. They would insist upon seeing me till they ferreted out the truth; and then they would pity me. My God! how they would pity me! Get me away, Ralph, as soon as possible, to-morrow if possible. I shall be safe at Daneborough in the middle of the Park. Nobody must come beyond the lodge-gates."

The woman whose beauty had been worshipped by her husband and praised by the world at large, and who was still beautiful, shrank with horror and disgust from the idea of a disease that made her an object of pity, to be spoken of henceforward in a hushed voice, as "Poor Lady Magdalen." She told her husband and son and daughter that no one must ever know; she implored her doctors to keep the secret of her dreadful malady, and then she went to the great silent house among the woods and hills, a house that was built for hospitality on a princely scale, and there she suffered with heroic calm until the end. She had her daughter with her throughout that long ordeal, and she died with her daughter's arms clasping and supporting her.

The vision of that sad time passed before Claudia in the brief silence while her father filled his glass with claret. The servants had gone, and they were alone, with the untouched dessert in front of them.

"Your aunt was delighted at the idea of going about with you. She talked of wanting nothing but travelling expenses for herself and maid. Indeed, she said if she were not wretchedly poor she would pay for her journeys out of her own purse."

"Aunt Louisa always talks of her wretched poverty; but she pays a prodigious rent for that odious flat, and she buys her clothes in the Rue de la Paix," said Claudia.

"I told her I should give her three hundred a year for what she calls her 'frocks.' She turned crimson with pleasure. I was afraid she was going to kiss me."

"Would that have been too unpleasant?"

"Not unpleasant—your aunt is a very agreeable woman—but embarrassing. However, she was charmed with the addition to her pin-money. She will put her flat in the hands of an agent to let furnished; but she is to bring her books and photographs and pet pieces of china here. She said she couldn't live without her household gods. I believe there will be a van-load of them. She wanted to bring her Japanese pug, but I told her your dogs would eat him, so she is going to lend him to your Aunt Lavinia."

"That was very wise of you, for I don't think Chieftain would put up with an intruder."

* * * * * *

Claudia went to Waterloo Station with her father next day. She wanted to go to Southampton with him, but he would not allow her to go beyond the door of the railway carriage. He was more affectionate than she had ever known him in that last quarter of an hour.

"I may be away a longish time, if nothing goes wrong at Skepton," he said. "But I shall keep you informed of my whereabouts, and you must write to me and tell me all you do, and the people you see. You must go nowhere without your aunt. People will have no excuse for not inviting her, as she belongs to their own world. I suppose you will want to go to the Riviera in the winter?"

"No, I think not. I would rather be at Daneborough."

"Then you would want to hunt?"

"No."

"Do you mean that you are sick of hunting?"

"I am sick of the people one meets. It is the same thing over and over again. I don't think I could be interested in the hounds any more, or care whether they found or didn't find. I seem to have used up most things, hunting among others."

"Well, you'll have to develop some new hobby. Good-bye."

The doors were being shut authoritatively; the

fever of farewells was in the air; distracted faces looked out of carriage windows, distracted arms waved on the platform, and the train was gone.

"I don't think my father has much more pleasure in life than I have," mused Claudia, as she moved quickly through the crowd, shepherded by her footman, to the neat little brougham, the reserved force of wealth expressed in studied simplicity. "We might have done better in life, both of us, if we had been fond of each other. Our sorrows would have been a bond."

She went back to the great empty house, and rewarded her dogs for their warm welcome by taking them for a walk. They were exercised twice a day by their special footman, who was fond of them and very good company, but a walk with their beloved mistress was a thing for wild rejoicing. They thought it a treat to be with her, and behaved much worse than with Thomas.

After the dog walk she lunched alone, with a book, and shuddered at the thought of to-morrow, and all the to-morrows that were to come after, in which she would have to lunch with her aunt, and make small talk.

That everlasting duet of two, with very few ideas in common, would be intolerable. Lady Louisa's companionship would drive Claudia back into the world. She must open her doors to other people, simply to escape the monotony of her chaperon's mind and speech. Solitude, the dreary solitude she had chosen in her sorrow, would henceforth be impossible.

Mrs. Vickers sent the butler to ask if Miss Rayner would like to see the rooms prepared for Lady Louisa, before her ladyship arrived, and Claudia spent a quarter of an hour in approving the housekeeper's arrangements.

The rooms were charming, blossoming with June roses on old-fashioned chintz. Sitting-room, bedroom, and dressing-room *en suite*. Guest chambers, good enough for a duchess.

"This is not the best suite," the housekeeper

explained. She had reserved that for staying company, possibly of a higher rank than Lord Altrincham's unmarried daughter.

Claudia took particular notice of the sofas and arm-chairs. She knew her aunt's temperament, and she hoped that the comfort of those downy nests would beguile Lady Louisa into spending a considerable portion of her days in the peaceful retirement of her own room. She had a lethargic constitution and an active mind, and her mind was always occupied with the things she was going to do, while her body was too sluggish ever to do them.

She was some years younger than her sister Magdalen, and in a family where beauty was the rule she had counted as the plain daughter, whereas she was good-looking enough to have taken high rank in a plain family. At forty she had a fine complexion and superb hair, and gave much attention to those charms.

"I had neither Magdalen's Greek profile nor Lavinia's commanding figure," she would remark in moments of expansion, to a friend and confidant, "and I was considered the plain sister, but I had the best complexion in the family, and it has outlasted all the others. My marchioness sister is as yellow as a banana."

Lady Louisa alluded to her eldest sister, who had made the best marriage, with a certain asperity, not because she bore ill-will to her sister personally, but because she thought the family had used her badly in taking no trouble to get her married as well as the others.

She was the last, and had come on the scene when her people were worn out with the duty of getting adequate establishments for three handsome daughters, and frustrating the bold attempts of detrimentals. All three had done well. Lady Susan had captured the youngest and richest marquis in the peerage during her first season. Lady Lavinia had hung fire a little, but had brought the middle-aged Earl of Sedgedale to her feet before she was three-and-twenty; while Magdalen had but just made her curtsey to her

sovereign when Ralph Rayner fell violently in love with her, at a charity bazaar, got himself introduced to her by hook or by crook, and carried her by storm. She was subjugated by the vital force of a man who was unlike any other man she had met. So there was a double wedding at St. George's, a marriage of splendour, which Lady Altrincham rejoiced in as a tremendous saving of trouble; and after this double event her ladyship folded her hands and rested from her labours, intending to spend most of her holidays in the country-houses of her three daughters.

"And I hope you mean to stay with your father and me, and take care of us when we are old," she told Louisa, after which speech she never—in Louisa's phrase—lifted a finger to get her youngest daughter established.

Lord Altrincham had been long at rest in the family vault in Staffordshire. His wife followed him to that gloomy sepulchre six years later, after spending two-thirds of those years in Italy or the South of France, a chronic invalid, with Louisa for her *souffre douleur*.

Lady Louisa had realised her mission as the last of the daughters, and had remained a spinster, first in dutiful attendance upon a gouty father, and afterwards upon a bronchitic mother; but now in sober middle-age, looking back upon dull years of duty, it seemed to her that she had been hardly used by her parents in having this post of spinster-daughter imposed upon her as a matter of course, and no trouble taken to find her a husband. Indeed, duties had been given her that kept her out of the way of possible good matches, and solely because she was not so handsome as her sisters. And now at forty-one she was well-preserved, and her hair and complexion were the admiration and envy of her friends, while her figure, which had expanded gradually with the passing of the years, was still amenable to the art of a Parisian corsetière.

She had six hundred a year *pour tout potage*, and always talked of herself as a pauper. The handsome addition to her income offered by Mr. Rayner was a windfall that she was able to appreciate.

Her household gods arrived in the afternoon,—three family portraits, an army of miniatures, books, china, relics and curios, a cottage piano, a zither, a guitar, and a mandoline, instruments which might have alarmed Claudia, had she not known that her aunt had not played upon any of them for the last ten years. There was an embroidery frame, and a portentous work-basket, although Lady Louisa's industry had for long been restricted to the easiest kind of knitting, soft woollen comforters and shawls for the poor of her brother's parishes, the whole bent of her later life having been towards the avoidance of everything that required effort. She was, indeed, the most restful of women, and after seeing and approving her rooms she left the entire business of placing and arranging her treasures to her maid and the housekeeper.

"Her ladyship must hang in the recess beside the mantelpiece, and his lordship in the corresponding position," she told Mrs. Vickers. "Bentley knows how I like my china arranged. I can make any alterations on Monday."

Bentley, who was middle-aged and of expansive figure, like her mistress, gave a faint sigh, knowing that the things would be altered and altered again, and that she would have to do all the work of alteration, while Lady Louisa would look on and give contradictory orders, and change her mind half a dozen times about the position of a tea-cup.

"You're going downstairs without your knitting, my lady," she cried, running after her mistress with the basket, and then Lady Louisa drifted slowly to the drawing-room, where she selected the most comfortable of all the arm-chairs, and established herself in a sunny window to wait for afternoon tea.

Claudia and the tea-tables appeared almost together.

"I hope you like your rooms, Aunt Louisa?"

"My dear, the rooms are too lovely for words. Your poor mother had such exquisite taste, the Safford taste. You never see an ugly object in a Safford house. I have brought a few of my treasures—just

the things I am fondest of—and I have left quite ornaments enough for a tenant."

Claudia found a little table for her aunt, and waited upon her with dutiful attention. Such small duties were easy. She would do anything for Lady Louisa's comfort, if only that placid and kindly person would spare her the joy of solitude, the only joy that life had left her.

* * * * * *

London was empty of such inhabitants as Lady Louisa considered her fellow-creatures. Most of the people she knew were scattered about the continent, from Homburg to St. Moritz, from Aix to Salzo Maggiore, pickling themselves in hot mud, or swallowing nasty waters to cure their gout or their ennui. When her treasures had been arranged to her liking, her family portraits hung, and her autumn frocks chosen and tried on, Lady Louisa found Park Lane in August a trifle dull; but she was too placid a person to rebel against dulness. The arm-chairs and sofas in her den conduced to afternoon slumbers, and she got through the lonely evenings with her knitting-pins and a novel; while Claudia sat buried in her low chair, with the reading lamp on the table at her side, poring over a book of appalling seriousness, the very aspect whereof frightened her aunt. Spencer, Bain, Clifford, Schopenhauer, Hartmann, books that dug deep down into the mystery of life and mind.

"I can't think how you can bear to read those dreadful people," Lady Louisa said shudderingly.

"I like them because they make me think. They take me out of myself."

"So unsettling!" sighed Lady Louisa.

"I hope I shall find them the other thing. My mind was chaos till I began to read Spencer—chaos and darkness. There is a gleam of light now, and something like order."

"How long have you been in London, Claudia?"

"I came here the week after Easter."

"And you have been seeing no one. Poor child! A London house without visitors is so triste. In the

country there is always something to be done—the garden—the stables."

"Yes, I think of my horses sometimes, and wonder if they are happy. The garden was always dear. My mother loved it."

"The Saffords have always been gardeners," said Lady Louisa, and then, after the ivory knitting-pins had been at work for some minutes with their slow clicking sound, she asked:

"When do you think of going to Daneborough?"

"I haven't thought about it. My father said I was to go when I liked. It will break my heart to see the rooms she loved—but then her ghost is in this house, too. Her ghost is everywhere."

"My poor Claudia, I can so fully sympathise——"

The girl checked her abruptly.

"Shall we go next week?" she asked, to ward off conventional consolation.

"I think it would be very nice. There is something about London in August that gets upon one's nerves, a chilling sense of emptiness. The Park was like a desert yesterday afternoon. You were wise to take your dogs for a walk, rather than drive with me."

Lady Louisa had been sent out alone every afternoon since her installation, Claudia finding excuses for not going with her. And in this season of mourning the dear girl was to be indulged, so Lady Louisa occupied the victoria alone, and was pleased to think she would have no livery-stable bill at the end of the quarter. She even thought of what gilt-edged securities she would choose for the investment of her savings by and by. She had made her means and her expenses a neat fit, but she had never known what it was to have a surplus; and now she would be really able to lay by the greater part of her income, and to make a nice little nest-egg for her old age, provided Claudia remained unmarried, and the present arrangement held good. It was pleasant to live in a house where even the flowers in her sitting-room and the novels from the circulating library were paid for by someone else.

* * * * * *

The removal to Daneborough was accomplished without any trouble for Claudia or her aunt. Servants did everything. A brougham came to the door at the proper moment, and Lady Louisa and her niece were driven to the station. Their luggage, and the servants' luggage, plate, linen, household gear of all kinds, had been sent on the day before. Maids had gone in advance to unpack. Books, paper-knives, writing-cases, inkstands, that had been on Claudia's tables in Park Lane, were waiting for her in her sitting-room at Daneborough, conveyed as if by magic, since in the plethora of her possessions she had been unconscious of their disappearance. Rooms had been chosen for Lady Louisa by the prudent Vickers—not the best rooms—nor even the second best—as Mrs. Vickers counted on house-parties in days to come; but the third best rooms at Daneborough were perfect in every detail that makes life worth living.

The house had been rebuilt by Ralph Rayner, and had been planned and finished with a noble disregard of cost. Derbyshire is a stone country, and the house was of dark grey stone, massive and plain, flanked by square towers, with conical roofs and machicolated cornices, after the fashion of King Henry's château at Pau, and it stood on the ridge of a wooded hill, with grander hills behind it, sheltered from north and east, but open to the sun and the south-west wind.

The gardens dropped from level to level, terrace below terrace, with dwarf walls and heavy balustrades, and broad stone steps, flanked by Grecian urns and shallow vases brimming over with gaudy flowers. There were yew hedges that had been growing for centuries; and within these dense green walls there were tennis and croquet lawns, and flower-gardens, Dutch and Italian, full of quaint devices and old-world fancies in verdure and in stone.

These hill-side gardens with their steep descents from terrace to terrace, were the glory of Daneborough, and Mr. Rayner's architect had prided himself upon devising a house in harmony with its environment. It was a land of woods, and peaks, and dark waters tumbling over rocky beds at the bottom of deep

gorges, a country of picturesque beauty that a man whose business-life had to be spent among chimneys and steam engines might naturally choose for his hours of ease. The park was large, and the timber fine, beeches to which tradition ascribed a fabulous age, oaks from which Druid priestesses had cut misletoe with their golden sickles, trees in which fugitive royalists had hidden. Tradition ran up and down the gamut of time, and imagination depicted the trees as of their present bulk and breadth, when serfs like Cedric were in charge of swine that browsed on acorns and beech-mast.

The wide green lawns sloped down to a river, and on the other side of the river, spanned by a single Norman arch, Mr. Rayner had built his church, a little way from the main road, and always preferred by the élite to the parish church of Daneborough.

Daneborough House without any staying company was decidedly triste, but Lady Louisa found the life bearable, as there were people scattered about the neighbourhood—well-born people living in "places," who made haste to call upon Miss Rayner, and who, being received in most cases by Lady Louisa, showed themselves pleased to cultivate that lady.

"My niece has made no struggle against her grief for my poor sister's death," Lady Louisa explained, apologising for Claudia's non-appearance. "She will be charmed to see her friends a little later; but she is a girl of very strong feelings, and though it is nearly a year since her loss she has not reconciled herself to the inevitable. She and her mother were quite romantically fond of each other—more like sisters than mother and daughter.

The visitor, Mrs. Grantley of Cumberley, opined that such devotion was very beautiful, and straightway invited Lady Louisa to luncheon. Cumberley was within ten miles, a quite easy distance, as no doubt they had motors at Daneborough.

No; there was no motor. Mr. Rayner had old-fashioned notions, and worshipped his horses. There were plenty of horses, and it would be a kindness to

the stable to use them. Claudia's only idea of exercise was to take long walks with her dogs.

"But she will hunt this winter, I hope," said Mrs. Grantley. "She was always keen about hunting."

"Not this winter, I'm afraid. I really don't know how she is to get through the winter—no hunting—and her father in America! I suppose it will end in our going to Cannes in December," Lady Louisa concluded complacently, being resolved that no pains should be spared on her part to achieve that result.

Besides the people who had "places" there was that minor section of people who had only houses and gardens in the immediate neighbourhood of Daneborough, half-pay colonels, widows and spinsters, daughters of soldiers, sailors, or parsons—people of indisputable gentility who kept their houses and gardens in apple-pie order, and who were, some of them, even well-connected; a phrase meaning that they had at least a cousin in the peerage, or, for preference, an uncle. These had been always assiduous card-leavers at Daneborough Park, and among these Lady Louisa found ample material for patronage, an art she loved.

It was patronage of the gentlest kind, untainted by hauteur, without a shade of arrogance. It was rather an officious beneficence, eager to oblige, and conscious of the power to radiate warmth. She patronised her acquaintance as the sun may seem to patronise the earth, pouring out benefits that can by no possibility be returned.

When she expatiated upon the beauty of Mrs. Higginson's rood and a half of rose-garden and accepted a faultless la France, or a Marèchal Niel, she could only smile graciously at the inevitable speech that accompanied the offering. "But why should I trouble you with one of my poor flowers, when your rose-garden is one of the finest in Derbyshire?"

Or when there came some question of what certain people had been doing—for the most part misconducting themselves—in the great world, it was only natural for Lady Louisa to be gently authoritative as she said, "No, dear Miss Floyer, it was the eldest

son the Duke hated. He got on quite well with Lord Rupert till this shocking affair."

Upon all questions relating to the peerage Lady Louisa was bowed down to as of absolute authority—in the "houses." In the "places" people took a different tone, would even dispute about facts, and pretend to know better. The places had cousins, nephews, uncles, or even brothers in the sacred volume.

"I like your cosy drawing-room ever so much better than that great east-windy saloon at Gomperts," she told Mrs. Higginson, and she spoke absolute truth, for in the chilling saloon she had been almost snubbed.

Lady Louisa praised the Derbyshire neighbours for their pleasant sociable ways. She had more invitations to luncheon and afternoon tea than she could accept. She had been asked to open a bazaar for the Church Restoration Fund, the grim old parish church that was shunned by the élite of Daneborough. She was enjoying the sweetness of being the only Lady Louisa within a four-mile radius of the little town.

"People drag me to their silly luncheon and tea parties, but I don't think it is quite fair to you to be so often away from home," she said to Claudia apologetically.

"Dear aunt, be as gay as ever you can out of doors, to make up for the dulness here, and pray ask your friends to luncheon or tea as often as you like, provided they don't want to see me."

"But are you going to live like a hermit always, Claudia?"

"No, not always. I suppose there will come a time when I must see people, and talk platitudes, and pretend to be interested in things I don't care about. That is the price people pay for not having to earn their daily bread. The bread-earners can do what they like."

"You ought to begin to see people. Remember it is more than a year——"

"Since my mother died!" cried the girl springing to her feet with a passionate movement. "Why do

you always say that? As if I had not counted the days and hours, and wondered how many weeks and months and years must pass before the edge is worn off my sorrow."

* * * * * *

The master of the hounds called one morning to urge Miss Rayner to resume her hunting. He had fallen in with his hounds at road exercise, and had brought them along with him to show her. They were rolling about on the great grass plat in front of the hall door, and he insisted upon her going to look at them.

"We shall be routing up the cubs next week," he said. "I hope you will come. I saw your hunters being exercised the other day—in fine condition. Someone told me you weren't going to hunt this season; but that can't be true. Come now, Miss Rayner, it would be sheer cussedness to keep such horses in your stables when the hounds are on foot."

She told him very quietly—hating to talk of her sorrow—that she was not going to hunt that season.

"Oh, that's too bad! Why it's more than a year since——"

She broke in hurriedly before he could finish the sentence:

"I may never hunt again," she said, "the taste has gone out of it."

"Never hunt again," he repeated slowly, and his eyes brightened as he thought that in such a case she would most likely sell her horses, and there would be chances, great chances, for a light-weight like himself.

He was a young man who had lately come into his property, and whose father had been dead less than six months; but his father had been an ardent sportsman, and in paradise or in purgatory would have hated to know that his pack was idle.

"Look at them," said the master, pointing out the hounds with his hunting crop. "Did you ever see such beauties?"

"They are dear creatures," she agreed, and went over to them and let them clamber about her, and

put their feet on her shoulders, and lick her face with their flapping tongues, while master and huntsman stood near enough to take care that they did not eat her. Their pads imprinted a pattern of clay and gravel all over her black gown.

Mr. Rayner was a member of the hunt and a generous subscriber, and had ridden to hounds with his daughter on splendid weight-carriers that had been the admiration of the county. He was what sportsmen called a bold bad rider, who enjoyed a long day's bucketting over moss and fell, and cared very little what became of the fox.

CHAPTER VII.

In those autumn months at Daneborough, when the great trees put on their livery of gold and copper, and when the hawthorns made spots of flame upon the green slopes of the Park, Claudia was living alone with ghosts and memories. She had her mother's dog and birds and horses and ponies, her mother's servants and pensioners and humble friends. She lived in the rooms that had belonged exclusively to her mother, and every book or ornament she touched seemed sacred and dear. There were no dry-as-dust authors, not even the popular historians. Lady Magdalen's culture had never gone beyond her favourite poets and novelists—Byron, Tennyson, Keats, Shelley, Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, and Bulwer. Those, with the changing fashions of the circulating library, the novels of a day, and the memoirs and journals and letters and reminiscences of a week, had been enough for her. In the country she required a new novel daily. She considered "Reminiscences" serious reading, and though she adored Shelley and Keats for their lyrics and shorter poems, she confessed to not understanding "Queen Mab" or "Prometheus Unbound" or "Endymion."

"They soar too high for me, quite out of my poor little world," she said, "and they make my head ache."

Byron was different, understandable from the first page of "Childe Harold" to the last line of "Don Juan." Even Cain was within the compass of Lady Magdalen's mind.

She and Claudia had read "Don Quixote" together

in the original, taking infinite pains, and some of Calderon's plays—*La vida e sueño*, and others—all for love of that romantic country which Claudia had never seen, and of which Lady Magdalen had seen only San Sebastian, and the country between Biarritz and that place. They had often talked of a Spanish tour, and even made plans about it. But there had always been social engagements that intervened, and Lady Magdalen's mind was a fugitive essence in which plans of future pleasures floated vaguely, vanishing at the touch of reality.

Spain was very far away, and travelling was difficult and fatiguing. Hotels were bad, except in the big cities. These objections came in the way of Lady Magdalen's romantic dreams of Seville and Granada; so the Spanish tour was never attempted. Claudia remembered her mother's pride in the thin streak of Spanish blood, and how she had talked of her South American ancestress, dwelling fondly on Manuela's descent from grandees and heroes of Old Spain.

"The poor thing did not live to come to England with her husband. She died in the bloom of her beauty, after the birth of a son—her only son—who did not survive her. It was quite a tragedy."

This was all that Lady Magdalen had been able to tell Claudia about Manuela Moorhouse. How tragic the young wife's doom had been she never knew. But the girl's dark hair and eyes, the ivory skin, and even the free grace of her tall figure, the step that was swift, firm and light, were ascribed to that Spanish marriage of a hundred years ago, which had mixed the blood of Old Spain with the blood of a Moorhouse descended from Norman pirates, the wild companions of Rou.

Lady Magdalen greatly regretted not having given her girl-baby a Spanish name.

"You ought to have been Carmen or Juanita," she said. "It was my mother who insisted upon Claudia, because it was a family name."

Claudia was glad that her mother had never been told of Manuela's dreadful fate, had never been disturbed by any fear of evil from that Spanish inheritance, had never foreshadowed the tragedy that

hastened her own end, that sharp agony of mind and heart coming suddenly upon the dull bodily pain, as if a dagger had been thrust into an open wound. She had never known, had never foreseen her son's fatal breakdown, even when his conduct showed mental exaltation that passed the border-line of reason.

The autumn days followed each other slowly, slowly as the leaves fell from the fine old trees, those falling leaves that the hunting men wanted to see down and done with, leaving clear vistas for the view of the hounds and of that sudden flash of red-brown among the grey that marked the passing of the fox.

Claudia's days went by in a placid monotony. She took long rambles over the hills, in that delightful land of peak and vale, where the world seems always new, so various are the aspects of deep wooded valleys and broad open spaces of pasture and common, steep ascents and gentle undulations, inland cliffs and unexpected rocks, every difference of level and every variety of timber. She had always loved the country round Daneborough, and during her long rambles in sunshine and showers she came nearer to happiness than she had been since her mother's death. She had her dogs for company, and she wanted no other. The collie generally deserted after the first half-hour, led astray by a field of sheep and some hereditary idea that it was his duty to worry them, or frankly lazy and yearning for the comforts of home; but Rag, the terrier, was staunch, and though he took wide circuits in pursuit of rabbits, always came back panting, to spring about her knees and assure her of his adoration.

At home she had her books, those books full of grave thoughts and unanswerable researches into the unthinkable, with which she tried to harden her mind, and escape from her narrow existence. After luncheon with Lady Louisa, and one sleepy hour of the trivial talk that kind person loved, she could decently retire to her solitude in Lady Magdalen's morning-room, leaving her aunt to her own devices till a quarter to eight, when they met in the drawing-room for a little more trivial talk before dinner.

After dinner Lady Louisa always entreated her niece to play to her, and invariably fell asleep before Claudia had been ten minutes at the piano. Number one in the first book of Mendelssohn's Lieder was fatal.

"Such a dreamy melody," Lady Louisa murmured, and lapsed from a murmur to a faint lady-like snore.

Claudia played for an hour or more, thinking in music, and then Lady Louisa sipped a little barley-water, and bade her niece good-night.

Claudia had thus brought her chaperon's duties to an irreducible minimum. It was hardly possible to imagine a less oppressive companionship. To be alone! That was the only joy left to the girl who had lost all she loved; to think her own thoughts and remember her dead, in a calm solitude. The things her mother had cared for, living or dead, were more to her than people. Marron, the poodle—an undemonstrative beast who had missed his adoring mistress at first, and had lain for day after day outside her bedroom door waiting for her—gradually reconciled himself to the inevitable, and took possession of her favourite arm-chair, which Claudia abandoned to his use. She was glad to have him there, a creature that had loved her mother, and that could not talk, could never remind her that it was more than a year since her mother's death, as people did. He was a proud poodle, conscious of his beauty, and that as a Marron he ranked above the blacks and whites of his species. In Lady Magdalen's lifetime he had been always decorated with sky-blue ribbon, and had worn silver bangles, but Claudia did not continue those frivolous ornaments. In a world overshadowed by grief they would have jarred.

The cockatoo was superb, a splendour of vivid colour, with a tail whose feathered tip touched the ground, four feet from his perch. Greed and vanity were his predominating qualities; but he liked being caressed, which liking passed for affection, and Claudia gave him as much love as she could spare from her dogs.

But to be quite alone in the world—to live with ghosts and sorrowful memories, to love nothing human

with anything higher than her tepid affection for her Aunt Louisa, a milk-and-water love which was at least more than she felt for her other aunts, Lady Delabole and Lady Sedgedale, those two great ladies who had always a certain subtle air of patronage in their dealings with her, as bearing in mind her father's commercial status, whereby she was only half-born. There was no human being whom she loved with half as fervid a love as she felt for her fox-terrier; and her heart sickened at the thought of the brief life that was so infinitely dear, and that here, too, must come the inevitable parting.

"Rag, my darling," she cried one day, kissing the pretty head in a sudden burst of tears, "God grant I may not outlive you."

The feeling of a loveless life grew stronger as the year waned, and the woods began to wear a look of desolation and ghostly quiet, the vague unearthly aspect that the forest assumes on winter afternoons when the rain falls softly through the grey distance.

"I wish my father had loved me," she said to herself, sitting in the firelight, with Marron asleep in the bergère opposite her, and Rag curled comfortably upon the skirt of her gown, and Chieftain lying flat in front of the fire like a dead animal thrown down carelessly.

"I wish my father had loved me," the inward voice repeated.

She had been thinking of her father very often of late, thinking of him seriously, with searching thoughts that went far back, groping in the irrecoverable past. Her conscience smote her as she remembered how little she had cared about his happiness, how lightly she had always thought of him, taking everything from him as a matter of course, and giving him nothing. She had even, in her unspoken thoughts, looked upon him, from the superior height of her maternal pedigree, as not quite a gentleman. And she had been angry with him for not loving her, forgetting that she had done nothing to win his love. She looked back and remembered him, and all those finer qualities which she had ignored when he was

near at hand stood out in a new and vivid light, now that he was far away. She remembered his devoted affection for her mother, his constancy and his indulgence; she remembered his benevolence, his liberality in all his dealings with his fellow-men, his lavish generosity to his family, his grand carelessness about the money he had worked so hard to win. Surely there was some touch of greatness in such a life, even in the piling up of a vast fortune to be spent upon other people. She remembered how little he had ever spent upon himself—no race-horses, no card-playing, no secret ménage; none of the indulgences that she had heard of rich men giving themselves; always the same high endeavour in the prosaic path he had chosen, prosaic only to the outside world that could not appreciate the joys of the inventor or the labour of the man who was always striving to improve and develop the materials at his command, always trying to widen the area of his usefulness.

She had been reading books that had taught her to think; and in the course of that studious reading she had learnt to think of her father, and to see his life and character in a new light.

"When he comes home I will try to make him love me," she thought, resolved to be his companion if he would have her company, to try as far as it might be possible to fill the empty place in his life, to make up to him for the loss of his son.

She brooded over these thoughts for a long time, and then suddenly her soul sickened at her isolation, and yearned for that one man who was bound to her by so close a tie, who ought to love her and be loved by her.

He had talked of being absent for an indefinite period. His last letter was from San Francisco, and he was going on to Mexico. He was careful to give her the stages of his travels, points where letters or cablegrams would reach him. After Mexico there would be South America. He had talked of prolonged wanderings. He wanted to see all the great cities, on both coasts. He might cross the Andes. Everything was made easy nowadays. He would come

home at an hour's notice—or in the first available steamer—if he were wanted at Skepton. It was of Skepton's needs he had thought, not of his daughter. Nothing was less likely than that she should want him.

Brooding over all he had said in that last day at home, and over his friendly but brief letters from different stages in his travels, Claudia came to a sudden resolve. She would go to him if he would let her, and travel with him. She was not afraid of roughing it in wild places, should his desire lead him from the beaten track. Strong, healthy, a splendid horse-woman, and an Atalanta on foot, she need not be a troublesome comrade. And in the intimate association of journeyings in strange countries they would be nearer each other than ever they had been in Park Lane or at Daneborough. They would realise for the first time that they were father and daughter.

She yearned for his affection, and she wanted to make him understand that her mind had ripened, and that she could honour him for qualities that had made no impression upon the trivial girl. She would make him understand that she was a woman, and that her sorrow had brought her closer to him in his sorrow, that their grief for the wife and mother, the son and brother, had made them one.

She sat down to write to him late at night, while the snow was falling outside the deep-set windows, and while the dropping of light wood ashes on the hearth, and the placid breathing of her dogs, were the only sounds in the spacious room, except when a loud yawn from Marron was uncannily echoed by the strings of the open piano.

The clock struck two, and Lady Louisa had entered upon her third series of dreams before Claudia's letter was finished.

She poured out her heart to the absent father, and told him of her remorse for her carelessness in the days that were gone.

"I think I am one of those people who can only love one person at a time," she wrote. "I concentrated my thoughts and feelings upon my mother. So far as love went she seemed the only person in the

world. You know how little I cared for the men who paid me attention—even for Frankland, though he was the best, and came nearest to interesting me. I cared only for mamma. She was all in all. She filled my heart, and I had no thought left for others, not for you or Michael. It was only when he was gone that I knew I loved him.

"And now I am quite alone. I sit where my mother sat, in the house that you made beautiful for us, and my heart aches for want of love. Let me love you, father, let me feel how precious a father's love can be. I can never be to you what Michael was. You said you could not begin again. But I may be your friend and comrade, if you will let me. I might be even a kind of son. I can learn to be interested in the things you care for. I am not a fool. I have been reading difficult books. I have taught myself a little geometry. I have read about modern inventions, and have learnt something about mechanics. If you will talk to me you will find that I shall understand, and it will be for you to teach me and let in the light upon all that is dark to me now. Let me join you on your travels. It will be a delight to me to see those strange cities. You know I am strong and active, that I can outwalk most of my friends, even the girls who pride themselves upon golf and hockey. And I can manage a horse. I should not be afraid of handling a mustang, if you were for riding across the Pampas. It would be better fun than the hunting here, which I know by heart.

"Connu, connu, connu! That has been the dismal cry of my soul about everything in England. Let me come to you in South America. Write to me by the very next mail and tell me where I am to join you, and how I am to travel, and if I am to bring a courier maid, or to come alone. I am not at all dependent on a maid. I would as soon be without one if she would be likely to be in the way. Just tell me the route, and where I am to meet you."

She felt strangely happy after she had written her letter, and she carried it to the Daneborough post office next morning and saw it stamped and registered. It was addressed to the Grand Hotel, Mexico.

It was Friday morning. The letter would be in ample time for the Saturday mail to New York, whence it would rush across the Rockies down to San Francisco. Or perhaps it would go by the Royal Mail Line, and not touch the United States. She had no knowledge of the route, but she tried to reckon the days that must pass before it would come to her father's hand. In the inevitable postscript she had implored him to cable to her. "I shall be dying with impatience till I know I may come."

It was a relief to have expressed all she felt and desired, fearlessly, with warmth and ardour, as she had never written or spoken to her father before. He was all she had in the world to love or to admire, and in her long reveries of late it had been borne in upon her that he was a man worth loving. From Mill, from Bain, from Clifford, from Herbert Spencer, she had learnt what things are worthy of honour and reverence, and she knew how she had erred in her estimate of her father.

A week went by—very slowly. She counted the days, trying to follow her letter across the sea, hoping that its delivery in Mexico would synchronise with her father's arrival there; that there would be no heart-sickening delay. And then, in the midst of her fiery impatience, her fever of unrest, her heart sank at the thought of leaving Rag, the fox-terrier. The other dogs could do without her. Their love was the tepid kind that can be consoled. But Rag! Did he suspect already? She fancied she could read yearning sadness in the dark eyes that looked at her so intently. She petted him with unusual tenderness, making it harder for him to do without her. She apologised to him for her intended desertion, and even began to wonder how long she would be away from him.

"I shall come back, my darling. I shall come back to you," she protested, sitting on the hearth-rug with him; "I shall come back in half a year."

She did not believe that the creator of Skepton would leave his work for more than a year; and her father had been away nearly five months already.

Their South American tour would be of a rapid kind, she felt sure, tearing journeys over long distances by express trains, through the darkness of tropical nights.

"Only half a year, my treasure," she said to her dog.

Marron descended from his chair and came slowly over to the rug, and pushed himself between her and the terrier, not that he loved her warmly enough to be jealous, but because he had to assert himself when a ridiculous fuss was being made about an inferior dog. She felt no compunction about abandoning her Aunt Louisa. That placid lady could continue to live at Daneborough and in Park Lane. She would have all the comforts and pleasures her soul loved—warm fires, luxurious rooms, exquisite food, carriages to ride in, and people to patronise. She would be caretaker in the two great houses; she would keep the servants employed, and would feel that she was doing Mr. Rayner a favour.

The next morning's post brought her one of her father's brief letters.

He was in excellent health, had been delighted with all he saw in California, and was still more interested in Mexico.

"I am travelling for travelling's sake now," he wrote, "but I shall have serious business in Brazil and Peru. I hope to have finished work and pleasure before next May, and to be at home early in June."

The letter was lying open on her table for a second reading when the butler brought her a cablegram. He was much paler than usual, and he looked at her with a countenance that was strangely grave, while his hand shook a little as he held the salver with the message. The local post-office had not kept its secret. The post-master had brought the message in his own hand.

Claudia did not see those signs of distress. She tore open the envelope eagerly, joyously even, oblivious of the impossibility of a reply to her letter within nine days.

"Mr. Rayner died suddenly of heart failure at seven o'clock this evening."

She read the words several times, slowly, with wondering eyes, as if she could not believe them, and then sank in a heap on the floor.

The butler had gone to summon her aunt.

"I'm afraid there is great trouble, my lady. Please go to Miss Rayner," and Lady Louisa, who had been sitting perusing yesterday's evening paper at her tea and toast before a Christmas fire, rushed downstairs in her silk petticoat and quilted satin matinée jacket, interrogating the butler as she went.

"The news is all over Daneborough by now, my lady. Mr. Rayner died yesterday. It's an awful shock for our young mistress."

CHAPTER VIII.

CLAUDIA was stunned by the blow. For the rest of that day she wandered about the house aimlessly, looking at familiar things as if she had never seen them before, sometimes standing at a window staring at the wintry park, the leafless woods, the cold grey sky. She did not know the hour of the day, or whether it was summer or winter. She was almost rude to her aunt, and could hardly refrain from pushing her away with violence when the kind lady hung over her compassionately, and patted her hair or caressed her cheek, as if the contact of soft, warm hands, with too many rings upon the plump fingers, could give comfort.

"Oh, leave me to myself, Aunt Louisa. Pray, pray, pray, leave me to myself."

"But, my dearest child, it is four o'clock, and you have had nothing, not even a cup of tea, since——"

"Since I knew that he is gone! He was all that was left. My father—a good father—yes, good, though I did not know. I was never grateful. I was a cold-hearted, undutiful daughter. Oh, leave me to myself, aunt. You make me talk—and the words hurt like knives. You make me suffer the pains of hell."

Lady Louisa retreated from her niece, distressed and scared. This was a case for clerical aid. The word "hell" indicated an immediate necessity. A little note was scribbled and sent off hastily to Mr. Lauriston, the incumbent of the church in the Park. Lady Louisa begged him to come at once, and he must insist upon seeing her niece. The dear girl was in a really bad way. The awful suddenness of her bereave-

ment was too much for her brain. Lady Louisa trembled for her reason.

The Reverend Wilfred Lauriston, a young man, and the best croquet-player within twenty miles, hastened across the Park, and so far as polite insistence could go tried his uttermost to see Miss Rayner. But as Claudia had locked the morning-room door upon herself directly her aunt left her, and positively refused to open it, Mr. Lauriston could only inform Lady Louisa that his mission had failed. He found her in the drawing-room, comforted by afternoon tea. Well-trained servants would serve tea in the midst of an earthquake, and there was no lessening of state or comfort because the owner of Daneborough lay dead somewhere near the Equator. Mr. Lauriston was glad to partake—his own word—of the feminine meal, which he did copiously, his appetite sharpened by the uphill walk through the Park, and seated in one of the delightful chairs—those snares for weak human flesh—a chair he would have refused in Lent—he took an easy view of the sad circumstances.

"If the dear young lady pleads to be left in solitude I should give way to her," he advised.

"But she was positively distracted. She has eaten nothing this day—and she talked of hell. She made my blood run cold—remembering her poor brother."

"Michael Rayner—a saint—too good for a decadent world. How sad that such a beautiful life should be cut short by an avoidable accident! When will people learn to be careful in handling fire-arms?"

"When, indeed," sighed Lady Louisa. "And do you really think I shall be justified in leaving my niece alone for the rest of the day?"

"I believe that solitude will be more soothing than sympathy. But, of course, she must be properly looked after. If she has some confidential servant, for instance."

"Yes, there is a favourite maid of my poor sister's. She was a nursemaid at Altrincham—my sister promoted her. She was in Claudia's nursery, and stayed on as an extra maid. The Safford servants never leave their service. The village is full of pensioners

from the great house. My grandfather invented a livery for the old men. They wear green corduroy jackets and buff gaiters, and keep the park roads and forest paths in order."

"That is just as it should be," said Mr. Lauriston. "If all great people in the land would only do as much, England might be Merry England again, and we should see a May-pole on every village green."

"My brother has bought up the public-houses on his property and started them on a new system. His cottages and village greens are ideal. He has had some idea of a May-pole."

And then suddenly remembering her niece, Lady Louisa rang the bell before Mr. Lauriston could leap across the hearth to anticipate her.

"Tell Mary to take a nice little tea to Miss Rayner," she told the footman, who, being country-bred and lazy, proceeded to clear away the tea-tables before carrying her ladyship's message.

"Go *at once*, Joseph," Lady Louisa said severely, and Joseph went.

"The servants in this house have so little to do that their chief study is to minimise their work," she said.

Old Mary prevailed where the parson had been repulsed. She called her mistress "Dear," and was affectionately insistent until the door was opened.

She found Claudia sitting on the floor with Rag on her lap. He knew that something dreadful had happened, and he licked her hand gently now and then to tell her that he was sorry. The other two dogs also knew, and Chieftain had gone away bored at the first opening of the door, while Marron, after walking round his mistress once or twice, had gone back to his easy-chair, to sleep till about an hour before his eight o'clock dinner, during which period of suspense it was his habit to roam about the room like an angry tiger, scratching the door occasionally and giving an indignant monosyllabic bark. By about twenty minutes past seven he behaved as if he felt sure that it must be eight, and the footman unpunctual.

Old Mary was about a dozen years older than Lady Louisa, but the epithet had been given her by Magdalen Rayner in the joyous early years of her married life, when they were still in the house in Hill Street, which locality Mary always referred to in after days as "the street." "That happened while we were living in the street, Miss Claudia."

Mary was a surplus servant, without specific duties, but who, perhaps, did more work than any other member of the household. Mary was asked to do all the things that other servants objected to do. She attended to the dogs and birds in health and sickness, made their winter coats, and sat up with them when the doctor ordered night-feeding. She washed Lady Magdalen's choicest lace, too precious to be trusted to any professional cleaner, lest it should be lost or exchanged for somebody else's inferior Brussels or Mechlin. She waited on her lady when the Parisian maid had a holiday or a sick-headache. She had ministered to generation after generation of rabbits, guinea-pigs, and white mice, when Michael was a little boy under the jurisdiction of a nursery-governess. She had worked in Claudia's childish flower-garden, and the richest reward she had ever desired was to take tea in the nursery or school-room, now and then, and to sit by the children's beds when they were ill.

Old Mary made her way into the morning-room, and her presence loosened the bands of ice round Claudia's heart and brought the relief of tears. To please old Mary she went up to her room and allowed her face to be bathed with perfumed water, and her hair dressed, all by Mary's light and clever hands, and to please Mary she changed her heavy cloth gown for a loose Japanese garment of wadded silk, and lay down to rest upon her sofa, while Mary piled logs on the low hearth, and brought the tea-tray, and coaxed her mistress till the dry lips consented to be refreshed with exquisite tea, and a few morsels of toast were eaten. No one but Mary could have done this; Félicité had not ventured to approach her mistress since the coming of evil news.

"I shall go if she sends for me, that goes without saying. But of my own accord, *mon Dieu! non, je n'ose vraiment pas*," she told Mrs. Vickers, in the room where maid and housekeeper ate their pudding with the butler and chef.

Old Mary put the reading-lamp by Claudia's side and brought some books from a table where the favourites of the moment were kept, the dainty little volumes, familiar poets, familiar essayists, books sacred and secular; and then she left the room without a word and went to give the dogs their dinner.

"Those poor pets might be forgotten," she said to herself; "they've lost their heads downstairs and can do nothing but talk."

Furious and prolonged barking from Marron, shut in the morning-room, indicated neglect. It was ten minutes past eight. Lady Louisa was dining, and the dogs' dinner tray was standing in a corridor, while the second footman, whose duty it was to carry it, talked to the third housemaid.

* * * * * *

Late that evening there arrived someone in authority, Mathew Rayner, from Skepton, whom Lady Louisa welcomed with rapture.

"It is such a relief to have you here, Mr. Rayner. It has been such a dreadful, dreary day for me. Claudia is almost distracted."

"Poor girl! She is quite alone now."

"She has her aunts, and plenty of cousins, on her mother's side; and she has you and your family. I don't call that being alone."

"She has never cottoned to my family," said Mathew; "I daresay she is fonder of your people."

"She ought to show some affection for us," said Lady Louisa. "My sister, Lady Delabole, was immensely useful to her in society. Magdalen might have been snubbed or forgotten if—if her own people had not given her opportunities."

"I don't think my brother would have allowed his wife to be snubbed. I don't think Lady Magdalen ever wanted outside help. She was a lovely woman,

and rich enough to make a grand effect in her world," said Mathew, with an air that made Lady Louisa feel uncomfortable.

"Will you let me order supper for you?" she asked. "I don't suppose you have dined."

"One does not dine on such days," said Mathew, which remark made Lady Louisa still more uncomfortable, as she had gone through the regulation dinner stolidly an hour before, considering it best for the household that there should be no diminution of state or service.

"But you will take tea, or a sandwich?"

"No, thank you. My daughters made me eat something before I left home. I shall want nothing to-night but a syphon and a biscuit."

"You would like brandy or whisky with your soda-water?" suggested Lady Louisa blandly, with her hand on the bell.

She thought whisky and soda was a confirmed habit of the middle classes.

"No, thank you. We are strict abstainers at Skepton; not because we are afraid of becoming drunkards, but because we have to preach the gospel of temperance to thousands, and one can hardly do that with a brandy and soda at one's elbow."

"Very, very nice of you," murmured Lady Louisa. "Do you think I may see Claudia to-night?"

"I fear not. She would not even receive our nice vicar, who came with words of consolation."

"Stereotyped phrases that would do more harm than good," said Mathew.

The door was opened suddenly as he spoke, and Claudia came into the room, a tall figure in deepest black. She had put on a tea-gown of soft black silk and crape and chiffon, one of those mourning garments that her aunt and her maid had urged her to cast aside. Her face was deadly white against the blackness of her gown, as she came to her uncle and put her hands in his, looking at him with sorrowful eyes.

He was like her father, of the same height and figure, almost the same features and complexion. He was one of the red Rayners, but a paler copy, and

he had not her father's eager look or commanding carriage. He had the business man's solid aspect, unpretending but unafraid, a man who could stand up before men.

"It was good of you to come," she said; and then she asked him to go with her to her mother's room.

"If you want to talk alone with your uncle, I can leave you and Mr. Rayner here, Claudia. I have letters to write upstairs. I must inform your aunts of your bereavement," said Lady Louisa with an offended air.

"What do they care? They never valued my father," Claudia said impatiently. "I want to talk to my uncle in my own room."

She put her arm through Mathew's and led him away. They had never been on the usual intimate terms of uncle and niece, but to-night, seeing his likeness to her father, her heart melted, and she almost loved him.

Fire and lamps were burning in her room, the piano that she had played upon in the morning, before the fatal news, was open, with loose sheets of music lying on it, and her father's last letter was on her table.

"Will you have him brought home, Uncle Mathew?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, of course."

"You will have him brought home—not sent home in a ship—alone—anyhow? You will find somebody who can be trusted to bring him home, to be sure that there shall be no disrespect. He was a king among men. I did not know how good he was—how almost great—till I lost him."

And then with impassioned eagerness she told her uncle of her poignant regret for the years of her girlhood, her neglect of her father.

"I was angry with him for not loving me, but I never tried to win his love. I was the sinner. I ought to have wanted his love. He would have been a different father to an affectionate daughter."

"He had a warm heart."

"Yes, he had a heart—a heart that would have

given me love for love if I had tried to make him fond of me. But I am a hard woman. I have always been hard—except to my mother. I could not love two people. She had all my heart—all—all!"

And then she told him how, in the solitude of the long, barren days when her life was only memory and thought, her heart had turned to her absent father. She told him of her letter—the letter that was to have brought about their union, in a strange country, among strange people.

"If you knew how happy I felt after I had written that letter, how I looked forward to being with him, what day-dreams I had of our travelling together, you would know what his death means for me," she said.

Her uncle was full of sympathy, and his own sorrow was unmistakable, though not expressed in many words.

"I was very fond of your father," he told her. "In all the years we worked together there was never an unkind word between us. His death means a great loss of happiness for me. Those were my brightest days when I had him at Skepton with me for one of his flying visits. We used to go into everything together. There was not a block of workmen's cottages, not a back-yard or woodstack, that we did not overhaul. Ralph had as keen an eye for details as he had for big things."

There was a silence. Claudia stood looking down at the fire, with her uncle's hand upon her shoulder—the large well-shaped hand, like her father's.

"Uncle Mathew," she said suddenly; "will you go to Mexico with me and let us bring him home together?"

"Impossible, my dear girl. I shall be more than ever wanted at Skepton now that he is gone. The knowledge of his death might raise a new spirit in the place. I have never had half his influence. He was a king. They feared him as much as they loved him. When we were on the verge of a strike once—nine years ago—his presence and the sound of his voice turned the tide. It was touch and go till he came."

And then, after a pause, he said, "I will see that everything is done—that the utmost respect is paid. Nothing shall be neglected or forgotten. And he shall be laid in the mausoleum that he built for his wife and son. Is that what you wish, Claudia?"

"Yes, in the mausoleum. He showed me the place where his coffin was to rest. Oh! God, I thought it would be in the far-off years. I never thought of him as a man who might be struck down in the prime of life. He seemed so strong."

"That illness three years ago changed him. He was never the same man afterwards. Your brother's death was a crushing blow. He did not often talk of his feelings—even to me."

"And to me, never," said Claudia mournfully.

Her uncle stayed with her for some time. He drew a chair to the fire and made her sit in the glow of the great beech logs, for he had felt her cold hands and seen her shiver. Rag, who had been lying on her sofa upstairs, had missed her, and had come to the morning-room in search of her, scratching too persistently to be denied.

"This is the only creature that loves me," Claudia said when the terrier was on her knees with his paws on her shoulders.

"You mustn't say that, Claudia my dear," Mathew answered gravely. "We would all be very fond of you—and very proud of you—if you would let us. But you have always kept us at arm's-length."

"I kept my father at arm's-length," Claudia said drearily. "One of the best men I ever knew—a man I ought to have married—told me that I was a hard woman. And it was true."

In his plain-sailing way her uncle was very kind to her. He urged her to go to Skepton with him. It would be good for her to be away from that house, full of sad associations, where the memory of her mother's sufferings and death was mixed with everything, and where this fatal news from far away had come upon her.

"You shall keep yourself to yourself. You shall hardly see anything of your cousins or of me; but I

think my wife will be able to look after your health better than Lady Louisa, who seems rather—rather——"

"A simpleton," interrupted Claudia. "She is. I can't stand her in the hour of sorrow. I shall keep her outside that door. But I had rather stay here; I must stay here till after my father has been laid in his last resting-place. You are very kind, Uncle Mathew, but I am best here. And I don't believe surroundings make any difference in sorrow. My thoughts would be just the same at Skepton. I have to dree my weird. Nothing can lessen my remorse for having been an unloving daughter."

CHAPTER IX.

Mathew Rayner left Daneborough early next day, but not before he had seen Mr. Lauriston and arranged that a memorial service should take place on the following Monday in the church that the dead man had built. Monday would give time for the fact to become known, and the day and hour would be announced from the pulpit at all the services on Sunday.

"I shall try to say a few not unfitting words," added Mr. Lauriston, which modest remark meant that he would meander in a maze of pathetic platitudes for at least half an hour.

Mr. Rayner told his niece that he would come back to Daneborough to be with her at the service on Monday, and by that time he would have made all arrangements for bringing home her dead.

Claudia went alone in the grey winter afternoon to look at the mausoleum where lay the mother whom she had loved and cherished above all earthly things, and where her brother's brief life had come to its last stage.

Ralph Rayner had chosen one of the most romantic spots in his domain for the house of the dead. In a cleft of the hill, mid-way between the long stretch of level ground on which the church stood and the crest of Scotch firs that crowned the ridge, he had made a clearing in the wood, where the mausoleum could be seen from far off, solitary and remote, a Greek temple of polished granite, with columns of darkest jasper and frieze of white marble, curiously different from the massive sepulchre of Queen Anne's reign, the monumental building of brick and stone, hidden

under a thick curtain of ivy, in which the dust of generations of patrician owners of the soil was lying. Mr. Rayner had repaired the brick-work and cleared the brambles from the hammered iron railing, and the elder mausoleum stood dark and grim under its mantle of ivy at the foot of the hill.

Claudia knelt on the lowest of the three broad steps in front of the bronze doors—double doors with the figure of an angel in high relief on either side. It was no new thing for her to visit her dead, to kneel on this lowest step, lost in a long reverie, or praying for her beloved in Paradise. Her religious ideas were vague, but she was not a materialist, inclined rather to think of the dead as near her, a living influence. To-day she poured out her soul in prayer for her father, dead in a strange land, among strange people. In all her thoughts of late she had thought of him as a good man, beneficent, doing nothing but good in the world; and she had no fear for his fate when he should come before the Supreme Judge of men and their actions. She had never thought, as her brother thought, of the lives of rich men. The ideas of the social democrat had never been accepted by her, and all the luxury and splendour of her surroundings had seemed to her an element in the general prosperity of her country, providing the means of life for throngs of humble people whose part in this world was to work in peace and contentment for their daily bread.

That which she felt most deeply as she knelt on the marble steps, chilled to the bone even in her long fur coat, was the sense of loneliness, the long blank life that stretched before her, alone in a world whose pleasures she had exhausted. The only people left her were people who bored her to extinction. Her aunts, her cousins in Mayfair and at Skepton, all equally boring, all saying the same things, doing the same things over and over again, as if moved by machinery. A wild rapture had filled her at the prospect of travelling in South America with her father, a new country, new things to look at, and for companion a strong-brained man who had never contemplated life from the conventional standpoint.

She went back to her solitude in the morning-room, where Lady Louisa pleaded in vain for admission, and where old Mary ministered to her with silent, unobtrusive affection. She wrote a little note to her aunt after the third repulse.

"Can't you understand, my dear, kind aunt, that I have had a dreadful blow—that I feel numbed and dull and cold, weighed down under a burden of confused thoughts. If I were to try to talk to you, or to try to listen to your kind words, I think I should go mad. Nothing can help me, but just to be alone, quite alone. You need not be anxious. Mary is taking care of me."

Lady Louisa was distressed and almost indignant.

"Mary! An under-nursemaid at Altrincham Park! That Claudia should prefer a servant to her aunt in the day of sorrow!"

Lady Louisa could but see in this preference one more indication of a strain of commonness, the Rayner strain with its taint of commerce, a taint that she had detected in her niece on various occasions. It was Lady Louisa's habit to ascribe everything people did, or said, or thought, to "blood." The Rayner blood explained this liking for low company. Ralph Rayner's grandmother, or certainly his great-grandmother, might have been a domestic servant.

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There was nothing to be done after the memorial service till the funeral—an interval of some weeks—a slow succession of dreary days to be suffered in silence. In the living world outside it was a time of bustle and festivity, a hurrying to and fro—Christmas and the New Year; but in the great house at Daneborough it was a time of dumb inaction, as if the world were dead.

After much persuasion from her niece Lady Louisa had gone off to spend the holidays at Altrincham Park, where there was to be a large family party, consisting mostly of those relations who had nothing better to do, and no big houses of their own.

Lady Magdalen had called these festal assemblies the gathering of the off-scouring, and had pitied

her brother, Altrincham, for having to be there. It was a season of milk and honey for bachelor uncles, spinster aunts, small children, school boys, and bread-and-butter girls, whose mothers were taking their pleasures amid the gold and green of orange groves along the Riviera, so happy, as they sat at the card-table in a sunlit verandah at Monte Carlo, to think that Mopsy or Topsy, Blinkie or Toots, was having a real good time with Uncle and Aunt Altrincham.

Lady Louisa loved a Safford Christmas, and she could hardly keep a sad countenance till she was clear of the Daneborough station, where the officials were ostentatiously sympathetic, and almost apologised for the Christmas decorations. Lady Louisa's grief expressed itself in smooth-faced cloth elaborately braided, and sable plumage. She had denied herself the relief of white satin revers to her jacket, though sorely tempted. She saw no occasion for crape—a thing she hated; but she was conscientiously black.

"He was a man I greatly respected," she told people.

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There was no stint of Christmas-cheer in the servants' hall and housekeeper's room at Daneborough; but there was to be no servants' ball, a loss the women and girls bore without a murmur, consoled by the excellence of their new mourning.

The school-children had their usual treat, and the Christmas-tree was not shorn of a coloured candle or a tinsel star, because the man who had built the schools was lying cold and dumb on board the great steamship ploughing her way through wintry seas. It was only in the empty rooms at Daneborough, the spacious hall and long corridors, scented with gardenias and golden lilies, that there was a silence like the silence of death.

Claudia lived with her dogs in the morning-room during all that season, and Mary was the only servant who was allowed to wait upon her. Félicité had been given a fortnight's holiday to keep Christmas and the New Year with kinsfolk in London, naturalised and established at a little perfumery shop near Leicester

Square. She was to order Miss Rayner's deeper mourning from the people in Dover Street; to make all selections and purchases, so that her mistress might not be troubled; and in the meantime Claudia roamed about the park and woods in her plain serge gown, one of those severe black gowns which she had been wearing for more than a year.

"Oh, miladi, when shall I see you dressed as becomes your beauty. *Toujours en deuil, toujours une toilette morne et lourde! Rien que le noir*," murmured Félicité, after taking her mistress's instructions.

The mourning ordered was to be of the deepest, and it was to be very plain. Claudia remembered having seen filial grief expressed in gowns so elaborate, such masterpieces of invention and detail, that the wearers might as properly have mourned in pink satin and spangled lace. The desire to be fine would have been no more obvious.

Mathew Rayner consulted his niece about the reading of the will. He knew that it was in the custody of his brother's solicitors at Leeds.

"Not till he is laid at rest," Claudia answered; "unless you want to know how he has disposed of his property on your own account."

"No, my dear, I have no impatience about the will, and very little curiosity. My brother told me what he had done for me some years ago, when I never thought that I should have to outlive him long. He was only my senior by three years. I believe that I shall be neither worse off nor better off now he is gone, and I am quite content with my position. My boys are ambitious, but they are not greedy. I think they are as contented as I am. And my girls have everything in the world that girls ought to have."

The New Year was a week old, and snow lay deep in the glades and hollows of the Park, when the master of Daneborough was brought to lie for a night and a day in the church that he had built. People came from a long way off to look upon the massive coffin of South American wood, hidden under heaped-up flowers, tribute from neighbours who had enjoyed

his lavish hospitality, or profited by his beneficence; wreaths and crosses, anchors and harps, floral devices in good and bad taste, from London, from Skepton, from hospitals and charities that he had helped, from struggling artists whom he had befriended. A throng of mourners, far too many to find standing room in the church, followed the priest and choir over the broad spaces where the snow had been cleared from the grass, while others tramped recklessly, ankle-deep in snow and slosh, to swell the crowd round the mausoleum, where Claudia stood by her uncle's side at the open door, among the family mourners—cousins male from the Safford side, and cousins, male and female, from Skepton.

There were candles burning on the altar in the mausoleum, and Claudia could see the two coffins—her mother's and her brother's—in white marble recesses, under ornate canopies on which the sculptured emblems made the best of death by the promise of resurrection. The light in the winter sky was fading fast as the coffin was carried to its place. The funeral hymn woke dismal echoes from hill and valley. The last prayer was said, the last of the mourners came slowly down the steps, after the last look at the coffin in its place opposite the altar. There was only one empty niche now. Ralph Rayner had told his daughter that she was to lie there, and that the name upon her coffin would be Claudia Rayner. She was never to marry, never to ally herself with strangers.

"There must be no more of our race," he had repeated, when he spoke of the mausoleum in their last hour together.

It was nearly a fortnight after the funeral when Mr. Bousfield, the Skepton solicitor, came to Daneborough with Mathew Rayner by appointment with Claudia.

She had fallen into a state of nervous prostration after that last scene in the mausoleum, and had been obliged to consent to medical attendance and to be treated as an invalid for a week, while that hateful word rest-cure had been mooted by the doctor, and murmured approvingly by Lady Louisa, who hurried

from Altrincham on hearing of her niece's illness, and was no longer to be kept at bay.

"I knew how it would be," she told Dr. Privet, the local practitioner, "the poor child was highly hysterical, shut herself up with her mother's confidential maid, an old servant from Altrincham, quite an uncultivated person. I knew there must be a break-down. It would never have happened if she had let me stay with her. We should have talked and talked, and she would have got accustomed to her grief. But her feelings were pent up in her own breast, poor darling, and the result was inevitable."

The doctor agreed, as he always did with foolish people, to save trouble.

"Undoubtedly," he said.

After that hint of a "rest-cure" Claudia made a great effort, accepted the doctor's tonic treatment, ate and drank as he advised her, went for a long walk in the woods with Rag, put on a dinner-gown, yawned through the evening in the drawing-room with her aunt, and when Dr. Privet came the following morning declared herself quite well.

"I must have caught cold in the Park last week," she said, shrinking from any mention of the day when she had stood on the marble steps by the open door of the mausoleum, while the funeral service was read and the hymn was sung. "I am not a creature of nerves."

She telegraphed to her uncle that morning, asking him to bring the solicitor at his convenience; then she went out in the teeth of the north wind and went for a long walk with her dogs, far beyond the Park and the woods, over the great bare hills to an upland village, where she took an hour's rest at the inn and gave her companions their dinner. She had left a little note for her aunt, so that there might be no alarm at her absence.

It was dusk when she went home through the Park, with weary limbs, but with mind braced and lightened by the long day in the open air. She took tea in the drawing-room with her aunt for the first time since the cablegram from Mexico, and encouraged

Lady Louisa to talk of the Safford Christmas, the reverential adoration of the neighbours, lay and clerical, the feudal devotion of the servants, the beauty of the Safford children, the popularity of Lord and Lady Altrincham."

"I don't believe there is a Radical in the parish," concluded Lady Louisa.

"My grandfather put the clock back a hundred years and my uncle has kept it unwound," said Claudia. "If Washington Irving were not dead, but only asleep, like Rip Van Winkle, he might come to Altrincham and find nothing altered since he wrote his little book about an English Christmas."

"I don't think Washington Irving had ever seen a really great house," Lady Louisa replied with dignity. "The best people in his books are only small squires. Another American, called Willis, gives a much more faithful picture of English society."

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Claudia received her uncle and Mr. Bousfield in the library, the large and somewhat sombre room which was more associated with her father than any other room at Daneborough. He had written his letters at the massive oak desk in front of the fireplace. He had interviewed people who came to him on iron business. People from Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam; customers or inventors; Americans, Colonials. The room was spacious and luxurious in a dull, heavy way, like the smoking-room in Park Lane; but its one grand feature was the canopied fireplace, saved from the wreck of the Tudor mansion, and the open hearth where the piled-up logs blazed high upon this January morning, and gave brightness to carved oak and dark red morocco.

Mr. Bousfield, senior partner in Bousfield, Gostling, and Barrow, an old-established firm of solicitors at Leeds, was almost dazzled by the fierce blaze and crimson light, as he came to the hearth where Claudia was standing, tall and straight, in her severe mourning, very pale, with raven black hair parted upon her broad forehead and neatly coiled at the back of her head. It was the very antithesis of hair-dressing in Leeds,

where the young women of Mr. Bousfield's acquaintance wore their hair over artificial erections that made their heads monstrous and their faces insignificant. The small head, with the heavy coil of plaits, was agreeable to the solicitor's eye.

Mathew Rayner drew one of the tables into the glowing space near the fire, and Mr. Bousfield unlocked his morocco bag and took out a large oblong envelope.

"There are legacies to servants," he said, "but I don't suppose you will consider it necessary to have the household present."

"No, no," Claudia answered.

She sat on a low chair on the opposite side of the hearth, her hands lying idle in her lap, her terrier coiled at her feet. Rag had made himself disagreeable to the Leeds solicitor on that gentleman's entrance, but had resigned himself to his presence, protesting only with an occasional low growl, muffled by Claudia's cloth gown. Mr. Bousfield looked at his young client with a touch of wonder. Her countenance and attitude expressed nothing but indifference, as if she had not the slightest personal concern in the document he was unfolding. He hitched his double eyeglass on to his dignified aquiline nose, looked at his client, and by way of preliminary remark told her that the will was not long.

Notwithstanding which statement, his deliberate reading of the list of legacies made the instrument seem interminable.

He began with the servants—house-servants, gardeners, odd-men, coachmen and grooms, farm-labourers, bailiff, game-keepers. No servant was specified by name, only by length of service. Then came the Skepton legacies. Clerks, porters, workmen, the servants who worked with mind and pen, and the servants who worked with thews and sinews, were all to be rewarded according to their length of service. The legacy in each case was liberal, but not excessive. A just man quietly thinking out his obligations to dependents would so measure his benefactions.

There were complimentary bequests to Mr. Bousfield and his two partners, and then came the more

serious items. "To my nephew, Theodore James Rayner, a twentieth share in the profits of all works in the town of Skepton, carried on under the name of Rayner and Son; to my nephew, Algernon Thomas Rayner, a like share; to my five foremen, Caleb Welsh, William Watley, Henry Baynes, Joseph Dryson, and James Jones, a sixty-fourth share, to expire on their ceasing to work in the business. To my nieces, Pearl, Veronica, and Ruby Rayner, each ten thousand pounds. To my brother Mathew Rayner, seven thousand a year, to be paid quarterly, as a first charge on the business, for the natural term of his life, whether he do, or do not, continue to act as general manager of the works, and to the said Mathew Rayner, Vale Hall, my house at Skepton, in which he is now living, with the lands and appurtenances."

Mathew sat somewhat behind his niece. He looked up when he was named. He was touched by this gift, which was a pleasant surprise. His brother had said that he was to be no poorer for his death; but there had been no promise about Vale Hall, the house that had been his home ever since he was a lad, where he had brought his wife as a bride, and where his five children had been born.

The residue of the estate, Daneborough Park, and all the lands and homesteads in Daneborough and adjoining parishes, the house in Park Lane, the iron works, subject to the above-named partnership, and all that went with them, cottages, bettermost houses, all the buildings and institutions that had not been absolutely dedicated to the public, money in the funds, pictures, plate, furniture, all that the house in Derbyshire and the house in London contained, horses and carriages at Daneborough, carts, wagons, steam-ploughs, farm-machinery and materials of all kinds are left "to my daughter and only child, Claudia Safford Rayner, on condition that she remain unmarried for the rest of her life. Should she, in spite of my desire, with my reason for which she is acquainted, choose to marry, at whatever distance of time, my entire estate as above described is to pass to my brother, Mathew Rayner, or his heirs and assigns,

chargeable with an annuity of seven hundred pounds to my said daughter."

The will had been executed a week after Lady Magdalen's death, and within two months of the tragedy that had made Ralph Rayner's world desolate.

Mathew started up from his chair, flushed and indignant.

"I am sorry for this," he said; "I am more sorry than I can say. It is a cruel will. I had no suspicion of my brother's intention. If he had told me what he meant to do I should have done my uttermost to dissuade him."

"Why should he tell you, Uncle Mathew? The statement in his will is true. I am not unacquainted with his reason for setting up a barrier against my marriage. It really makes very little difference. I am six-and-twenty, and I have never contemplated marriage. I am not likely ever to wish to marry."

"Oh, it is impossible! The day must come when you will care for someone, when you will sicken at a lonely life, and meet the man you can esteem and love. There are plenty of good men in the world—men who are not fortune-hunters. No doubt it was to guard you from a mercenary suitor that your father made this condition."

"Don't make a fuss, Uncle Mathew," Claudia said wearily, with a faint touch of disdain, since she thought that her uncle's commercial mind must be quick to see the dazzling prospect opening before him—on the chance of her falling in love and flinging fortune to the winds.

"Of course he believes that I shall marry and that everything will be his in a year or two," she thought. "No man can ever realise the fact that a woman may be self-sufficing—above all, no Philistine man."

And then, after a brief pause, she rose from her low chair, calm as marble, shook hands with her uncle, and then with the solicitor.

"Please take Mr. Bousfield to the dining-room, uncle. I told them to have luncheon ready at one o'clock."

"Won't you lunch with us?"

"I never take a formal luncheon. Lady Louisa will join you. I hope she won't feel offended at not being mentioned in the will. My father has left me rich enough to make everybody happy."

Her uncle opened the door for her and stood watching her as she went across the hall to a door that opened into the garden, Rag barking joyously at the prospect of release. He was greatly shocked at his brother's will, and he foresaw estrangement between his niece and himself. Mathew had seen more of her, and come nearer to her in the days of mourning than in all the years that had gone before. He knew that she had looked coldly upon her Skepton relations; and now she would think of him as waiting for her to marry and forfeit all the things she cared for.

He was not avaricious. He had always been well off, and had lived the life that suited him. Seven thousand a year was the maximum of his spending capacity. He was not a collector like his brother, and he would be no happier in a room whose walls were hung with historical tapestry than in his prettily-papered drawing-room with proof-engravings of Landseer's dog and stag pictures.

Rose du Barry tea-services, Chelsea shepherdesses, bronzes and enamels, left him cold. He liked a good horse in his dog-cart, and a clever cob for an occasional pottering morning with the hounds, but he had never been a hunting man. All the best of his life had been given to his brother's business, and all his pride had been in the growth and prosperity of those vast workshops that had eaten up all the other works in Skepton as Aaron's rod swallowed the rods of the magicians.

But would Claudia ever believe that he was not eager for the inevitable hour in a woman's life when love would be lord of all? He feared not.

CHAPTER X.

THERE had been no affectation in Claudia's indifferent attitude when she heard the terms on which she was to hold her wealth. It had seemed to her in these last dreary years that she had no love left to give to a husband, that of all things in the world nothing was more unlikely than that a man's love should come into her life and tempt her to surrender her liberty of thought and action. Liberty had seemed the only joy that remained to her; and now that she knew herself infinitely rich, liberty meant a great deal—liberty to travel over the face of the earth, to see strange places that few women had ever seen, to do things that few women would dare do. For all such exploits wealth was indispensable—white wings of a two thousand-ton yacht to carry her to the South Seas, troops of servants, strings of horses, porters, guides, perhaps even soldiers, to guard her in untrodden paths, an estancia in Brazil, a fairylike villa on such an island as Robert Louis Stevenson's Samoa—all such things could be bought with money.

It was some time before she knew the value of her possessions, and it was not till she had been to Skepton that she felt the extent of her power. That consciousness of power thrilled her. It was a new sense.

Mathew Rayner wrote to her a week after the reading of the will to suggest that she should come to Skepton for a few days and let her work-people see her.

"They all loved your father, and it is natural that they should like to see you," he wrote, and with his

letter there came an invitation from Mrs. Mathew, laying Vale Hall at her feet.

Claudia accepted the invitation in words that were almost cordial. She did not want her relations to think that she was angry with them because of her father's will, though she had no doubt that the whole family were counting the days till she should marry and forfeit her estate.

"I wonder whether they will put temptation in my way and invite their ideal man to meet me?" she thought. "They would even sacrifice Ruby's *fiancé*, perhaps, for the general good."

Ruby's engagement to a briefless barrister threatened to be long before it ripened into marriage. Her father had told the briefless one that he must show his capacity for maintaining a wife before he would be allowed to lead Ruby Rayner from the paternal home, and Ruby was not averse from waiting, considering the position of an engaged girl quite the most interesting period in a woman's life. She liked having a young man to domineer over and order about, a young man who had to pour out his soul and describe any new musical comedy that he had witnessed in a long letter to his beloved at least twice a week, whatever amount of devilling or other unremunerative work he might have; and who had to send his liege lady graceful little gifts that his brieflessness could ill afford; and who had to come to Skepton for a week-end visit at least once a month, at whatever trouble and inconvenience, freezing himself in a third-class compartment through a long winter day, to be thawed by his mistress's smiles and his future father-in-law's excellent wine, for though Mathew Rayner took no wine himself he gave his visitors the best he could buy. Ruby knew that this was her good time, and that nothing she had ever seen in the wedded bliss of her friends was half as good.

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Claudia had only been at Skepton once in her life, for a few days during her father's serious illness, and then she had seen no more of the place than that

which lay between the station and the block of buildings that held the sick room.

The family and commercial hotel hard by had sheltered her and her mother, with maids and footman, and neither mother nor daughter had taken the trouble to explore the place that was the source of their wealth.

She looked at it with different eyes on this bleak January evening, as she drove through a wide street of tall stone houses on her way to Vale Hall.

Her uncle had sent his carriage to meet her, but had not come himself. She had expected to see him on the platform, had been prepared for the utmost adulation from her Skepton kindred. She sat alone in the comfortable brougham, looking at the long, wide street, the shops all open and brilliantly lighted; the people moving to and fro; women carrying market-baskets, and with children at their skirts; open shop-fronts, overflowing with food; butchers' shops where the great red carcases hung in long rows, two or three stages high; grocers' shops, where the flaring gas glittered on blue and scarlet tins and gaudy jam pots, piles of oranges and bananas—everywhere a plethora of provisions. And above the busy street there rose the fire-towers, monstrous chimneys, vomiting flame into a black sky, flame that flashed from the darkness by fits and starts, with a strange rushing sound. When she let down the carriage window the taste of the fire came into her mouth, a dry heat that almost choked her. And people had to live in that furnace!

At last the shops came to an end, and the thoroughfare widened to an open square, with public buildings on either side—the banks, the library, the museum, the club, all built of the same dark stone.

Then, after the broad open square with its central space of lawn and gravel paths, the street became a high road, with rows of cottages, block after block, and here and there a villa, and, for variety, three blocks of almshouses, making three sides of a quadrangle, with a garden showing dimly behind iron railings;

and then more cottages on both sides of the road, making one long street of square stone houses, with the same windows, the same slate roofs, till they ended all at once, and the road became a country road with a high brick wall on one side and a hedge on the other side, across which Claudia saw a wide stretch of level pasture and a long line of hills, dark in the wintry distance.

The wall was the boundary of her Uncle Mathew's "grounds," his flower and kitchen garden, and hot-houses and stables, all on a spacious plan, as her grandfather had planned them forty years before.

Veronica and Pearl were on the steps in front of the great square stone porch as Claudia alighted. Her aunt was in the hall, and Ruby rushed out of the drawing-room to meet her. There was quite enough fuss here to make up for her uncle's absence.

Would she go to the drawing-room for tea, or to her own room ?

"To my own room, please, aunt. I feel too tired and stupid for anything. Mary can bring me some tea."

"Run and tell James to mash the tea and bring the tray from the drawing-room," said Mrs. Rayner; and Veronica, the youngest of the three girls, ran downstairs, while Claudia was being conducted in state to the best of the four spare rooms, where a huge coal fire blazed on a tesselated hearth behind a steel fender of the fashion of forty years ago.

Everything in the room dated from the Great Exhibition of 1862. All the furniture was of polished mahogany, the best in material and in manufacture that money could buy. The bedstead was Arabian, with a lofty canopy, and a footboard of colossal size, rich in scrolls and mouldings, a footboard that required the assiduous toil of two housemaids to do it justice.

A Duchesse dressing-table occupied the central space in a vast bay, with three long windows opening on to a balcony. For people who could appreciate the furniture of 1862 the room was perfection. Sofa and easy chairs, writing-table, a huge wardrobe with looking-glass doors, a French clock on the broad

marble mantelpiece, an Axminster carpet and hearth-rug made to order, and gas-brackets jutting out wherever a lamp could be needed, all that makes for comfort, was provided in the best spare-room at Vale Hall.

Old Mary thought it the handsomest bedroom she had ever seen, and far superior to the white enamelled furniture and flowery chintz in her young lady's rooms at Daneborough. Nor was she less impressed by the florid silver tea-service when she took the tray from the footman at the door. Everything was so rich and handsome. The sugar tongs were big and heavy enough to have served for putting coals on the fire—sad to see in an age when rude people had taken to ignoring sugar-tongs—Mary thought.

The three young women clustered round their cousin and devoured her with their eyes. Pearl was the only one who had seen her since Lady Magdalen's death. They were disappointed in her mourning, which was too plain to throw much light upon the latest Paris fashions. There was nothing to be learnt but the cut of the skirt and the shape of the sleeve. These the sewing-maid who attended on the three sisters would be able to obtain from Mary, who would no doubt allow her to make paper patterns.

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The next day was Sunday, and Claudia, for the first time in her life, became acquainted with the Philistine Sunday, the day of rest and early dinner, as it is kept in the house of middle-class respectability, where a game of bridge would be thought terrible enough to bring down fire from heaven, where the billiard-table was never uncovered, and where novels were only read in secret. Claudia breakfasted in her bed-room and did not go to church with the family; but she joined them at luncheon, when they met in full strength, father and mother, sons and daughters, and Ruby's *fiancé*, in the presence of a colossal sirloin which Mathew carved, while the highly respectable butler and footman handed what seemed to Claudia an endless procession of accompaniments to beef, four or five vegetables, horse-radish sauce,

Yorkshire pudding. She had never before seen the family so assembled, and they seemed to her almost appalling in the strength of their respectability, a British beef-eating household of as marked a pattern as a family of Israelites sitting at their passover supper. They all looked models of vital force, and among those florid complexions and bright eyes the London face of Ruby's *fiancé* showed languid and pale.

They were all of cheerful aspect, the brothers and sisters chaffing each other, and convulsed by small jokes, their father absorbed by his work with the carving-knife, their mother maintaining a smiling silence, broken by a mild reproof now and then, when the "chaff" touched the brink of indiscretion.

There was a good deal said about the beef before the knives and forks had all settled to their work; whether it was quite as good, or not so good, as the sirloin of last Sunday; whether it was a shade too much cooked or a thought underdone.

"Jane Morgan ought to be able to roast a joint properly, after cooking for us nineteen years," Mrs. Rayner said, with a slightly wounded air, and Claudia thought of the long succession of beefy Sundays, the unchanging, the inevitable, which these cousins of hers had endured from earliest childhood, for her aunt had just told her how, in their nursery and school-room stages, the children had always dined with their parents on Sunday.

"I call it dinner," said Mrs. Rayner, "but my girls insist upon calling it luncheon."

They had eaten this weekly meal all their lives, and were healthy and happy. On Saturday evening there had been the normal family dinner, served as it would have been served in West-end London; but this Sunday sirloin smoking on the table was a thing apart. Claudia could but wonder, thinking of her own life, and the inventions that had been brought to bear upon this particular day to make it tolerable to the people among whom she had lived—the up-river parties, the London luncheons, the choice music, the wonderful dinners, where all who were most splendid in rank

and most renowned in politics and art and literature, were brought together, sometimes with disappointing result, a gathering of stars being pronounced "boring to tears." She thought of the London restaurants, where the crowded tables almost touched, and the service was difficult because of the throng. She thought of the flower-bed vision of picture hats and jewelled throats, velvet and satin, feather and fur, a kaleidoscope of changing form and colour; and of winter afternoons in lamp-lit drawing-rooms, odorous with carnations from the sea-shore gardens between San Remo and Genoa, cosy little parties where the people who thought themselves the salt of the earth sat in a gentle silence through continual rubbers of bridge.

She thought how Mayfair would have shuddered at the vision of a family of eight people leavened by only one stranger, and that one a prospective member of the family. And yet these kinsfolk of hers were happy, and, no doubt, they would discuss next Sunday's beef with just the same interest and animation.

"One thing I will say for our butcher," Mrs. Rayner remarked, addressing herself to Claudia; "we don't get as fine a sirloin in London. I know when we were in Norfolk Square the summer before last our Sunday beef was never up to the mark."

And then Claudia knew that even in the London season, with the "Savoy," the "Carlton," "Skindle's," the "White Hart," the "Star and Garter," calling them, her Rayner cousins ate their Sunday beef in family conclave, as Israel eats its paschal lamb.

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She went out with her uncle directly after breakfast on Monday morning to survey the things that belonged to her. He had proposed driving her in his dog-cart, as it was a fine morning, but she told him of her long rambles over the Derbyshire hills, and assured him that she was able to walk as far as he was likely to take her.

He showed her everything: the vast and terrible

workshops where rails were made for the iron roads of England and the Continent, other workshops for the forging of bolts and nuts, nuts and bolts, and all the variety of small and seemingly unimportant things that had made her father rich. He took her into vast halls where the cold winter sky looked down upon them from great sky-lights, and where the mammoth engines, the giant wheels and piston-rods, made her blood run cold, as at the sight of something awful and mysterious that might burst its bonds and rush at her like a mad mastodon. These monsters moved so easily, sliding backwards and forwards with rhythmical motion, held only by loose straps of leather. They seemed alive and terrible. Her uncle took her into workshop after workshop; floor above floor; room after room; smelting works; furnaces of different orders, cold blast, hot blast. The whole history of raw iron and manufactured iron was to be learnt at Skepton; where tens of thousands of tons of the red ore from Spain was changed into the things that make for civilisation—piston-rods and rails, marine forgings, things heavy and light, large and small. Black towers, a hundred feet in height, from the blast-furnaces, rose up against the smoke-darkened sky; and everywhere in the iron-town Claudia saw the same strange forms repeated, so strange, so lurid, so appalling, that her kingdom seemed a circle lifted out of Dante's Inferno. Her brain reeled and her feet ached and her knees trembled by the time she had seen the wonders of the iron-town, and her throat and eyes were scorched by the hot air.

"And now you have seen the sources of your wealth," said Mathew, when he had seated her comfortably in an arm-chair by the fire in his office. "You have seen all that the Skepton workpeople have done for your father; and when you are rested I should like to show you what your father did for them."

"Yes, I should love to see that."

It was the workpeople's dinner-hour, and great bells were ringing high up in the dark sky—a bell for each of the works—when Claudia and her uncle went

out. Armies of men and lads, from whose footsteps there sounded the ring of iron clogs, came pouring out into the wintry air, from every cavernous hall of heat and smoke and red dust, tramping this way and that, with rapid steps, each to a comfortable home.

The road from the station to Vale Hall had been along a flat, but now Claudia explored the other side of Skepton—street after street, built on the slope of a hill, above the fire-zone. The steep hill-side was ridged with streets, in a gradual ascent, sixty-five feet wide from house to house, with a slip of garden for each house, gardens now white with the Monday wash—shirts, petticoats, linen, lace curtains, lace antimacassars, bright-coloured counterpanes, all fluttering in a January breeze. Claudia was glad to see so many lace curtains, so many gay colours, indicating lives that were not all given over to the struggle for bare existence. Margin there was at least for soap and water, and cheap Nottingham lace, and time enough for cleanly habits. She noted that the windows in the square stone houses shone brightly, and the doorsteps were clean, some white, some yellow, some red, but all indicating care and labour.

"Thirty years ago this was the moor," said her uncle when they had come to the last of the streets.

The high road in front of them wound upward past meadows that had a dreary look under the winter sky, and beyond there rose the long ridge of the moor, broken by scattered rocks and cleft asunder by deep gorges.

"Did my father build all these streets, all these square houses ?" Claudia asked.

"Every one of them. Where we are standing now there was nothing but the moor. He bought the land and enclosed those fields, and built the streets as they were needed."

"All of the same pattern," sighed Claudia. "Do the people mind ?"

"Do they mind—what ?"

"Do they mind the houses being so monotonous, the streets so dreadfully regular ?"

"Why should they grumble at the regularity—any more than the people at Lancaster Gate?"

"But imagine Lancaster Gate repeated—terrace after terrace! Of course, Bayswater is dreadful," as if she were stating an incontrovertible truth, "but picture to yourself Bayswater multiplied indefinitely, like these streets."

"My dear girl, people live inside their houses, not outside; and our people have no leisure to think of fiddle-faddle. They are glad to live in pure air, away from the smoke and the smother. They are not troubled by what you call the æsthetic sense."

"Poor things! It never enters into their lives. But how do they know one street from another?"

Mathew pointed to the carved stone on the corner house. "Gladstone Street."

"Every street has its name, and a name that means something," he said. "Kelvin Street, Owen Street, Spencer Street, Darwin Street, Roberts Street, Wolseley Street, Salisbury Street. Your father chose the names of men who ought to be remembered. And now you had better come into one of the houses, and you will see that they are not altogether dreadful. They are your houses, remember, Claudia, and I don't want you to feel ashamed of them."

"But I shall feel ashamed to my dying day, Uncle Mathew; bowed down with shame to think of people who work for me having to live in streets like the bars of a gridiron. The monotony must get on their nerves."

And then she suddenly remembered the great block of roast beef on the luncheon-table yesterday, and that her cousins had endured the monotony of such meals for twenty years and upwards, and she thought that the workpeople might be of the same fibre, a fibre that was different from her own.

Her uncle took her through one of the little front-gardens, the square patch, eighteen feet by eighteen, where the Monday wash was on view. He stopped to tell her that the width of the street and the front gardens came to sixty-five feet, that the gardens at

the back of the cottages were thirty feet long. These measurements sounded pitiful to the new owner of the property.

Mathew pressed an electric bell, and a woman opened the door, who greeted him smilingly with an old-fashioned curtsey.

"I have brought my niece to look at your cottage, Mrs. Worboys."

"Oh, sir; oh, miss, and a washing day! It won't do the cottage justice." She looked with wide-eyed admiration at the tall figure in deepest black, and dropped another curtsey. "I should have liked you to have seen everything at its best, miss, everything that your good father made so pretty and so convenient."

She was a young woman, neatly clad, bright and trim. She spoke with the West Riding accent, and there were local words that were new to Claudia, but she spoke like a woman upon whom the work of the school board had not been wasted. And then she took the new owner in hand and showed her every room in the strong square house, every room and every corner, with all its amenities, its clever inventions for comfort, for health, for cleanliness, nay, even for a certain quaint prettiness—the cupboards; the brackets; the window-seats, which were at once boxes for stowing things and benches to sit upon; the three gates that guarded the staircase, so that the most mischievous child couldn't fall far enough to crack his bones; the ingenious arrangements for cooking with the maximum convenience and economy; the blocks of shelves in the parlour, that could be used either for books or crockery, or for an artistic admixture of both; the perfect sanitation; and, last but not least, the compulsory ventilation. In this one thing only Ralph Rayner had shown himself a despot.

"Any interference with the ventilators and a week's notice to quit," said Mrs. Worboys. "Most of us rebelled against it at first, in our thoughts; and some of us were cheeky to the collector; but when we all found that the children had better health

and not near as many colds or coughs, we got reconciled to the wind blowing in upon us a bit now and then—and, after all, it only blows in at the bottom of the window and out at the top, and hardly touches us sitting in the middle of the room—so that now I don't know how we should feel without the ventilators."

And then she showed Claudia the various devices for letting in the fresh air without dangerous draughts. Every detail in the six-roomed house testified to the organising power of the man who planned it.

"Your father was an inventor," said Mathew, "and the capacity that made Skepton came to bear just as well upon the arrangement of a kitchen or the planning of a bath-room. These cottages were some of his toys. When you see the club and the library and the recreation rooms you will see some more of his toys."

"He never talked about them," Claudia said, rather regretfully.

"Not to you or your mother, perhaps, but he used to talk of them to Michael."

"He talked to Michael of everything he loved."

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Claudia was shown the public baths—with vast space for swimming matches and a lofty glass roof, with stages at different heights, from which expert divers were wont to take tremendous headers; and beyond this building there was the open-air swimming bath for fine weather. Mathew told her how swimming and diving contests for men and women were a great feature in Skepton life, and he told her what pains his brother had taken to encourage the exercise, two days a week being reserved for the women, and one day for boys under twelve, who frisked about the great bath "like troutlets in a pool" under the direction of a professor in the art of natation.

The spacious hall, surrounded with dressing-rooms, was built chiefly of iron and glass, and was lighted by electricity, and there were coloured lamps grouped here and there amidst the pure white light, that gave an air of gaiety to the scene in the long winter evenings.

"I believe this building is our children's idea of a fairy palace," Mathew said; "our children" meaning the offspring of the iron-works.

Claudia insisted on seeing everything—the library and reading-rooms, the club, the recreation rooms, consisting of theatre and concert hall, a room for adult games, and a children's play-room, with a spacious buffet for refreshments, all under the control of a committee chosen from among the workpeople, and generally numbering the best and most intelligent members of the community.

"Our people have a wonderful knack of knowing their own business," said Mathew.

The visits to the hospitals for adults and children took a good time, and Mathew told his niece of an open-air hospital and a convalescent home, each some miles away, on high ground and amid rural surroundings. Then there were several sets of almshouses for the old people, and homes for orphan children, and a school of art and industry, where wonderful things in brass and copper and iron and bronze and wood and clay were made by the gifted and artistic among the young people. There were evening schools for adults, and an Athenæum for the superior class who preferred lectures and political or literary debate to the less intelligent amusements of the club; and there was a club-house for the women, where mothers' meetings, cookery classes, dressmaking classes, and choral classes were held on different evenings, and whence, on dark winter nights, came the sound of old English glees and catches shrilling through the frosty air.

It was all wonderful in the eyes of Ralph Rayner's daughter. Everywhere the same inventive power, the same adaptation of means to the end, the same comprehension of the things that are wanted for pleasure and for comfort, the same ingenuity in getting the utmost amount of enjoyment or useful occupation out of the scanty leisure in working-people's lives.

"Our public buildings close at half-past ten o'clock," Mathew told her; "lights are out, doors shut before

the half-hour carillon has finished. We have carillons that my brother had made for him in Bruges."

"Yes, I heard the bells playing 'Rule, Britannia' as I drove through the town on Saturday night."

"They play only hymn tunes and national airs—'Christian Soldiers,' 'Jerusalem the golden,' 'God save the King,' 'Auld Lang Syne,' 'Garryowen.' We are very proud of our bells."

Claudia was brain-weary with much wonder when she went back to Vale Hall. Afternoon tea was going on in the drawing-room, where the whole family and three or four visitors were assembled, her aunt at the tea-table, Ruby and her *fiancé* sitting side by side, the sons of the house handing tea-cups.

"Are they always all together?" Claudia wondered; "always such a massive family?"

And then she thought of Herbert Spencer's theory of evolution, and how heterogeneity was the note of progress. This highly respectable family was the most homogeneous she had ever known. Would evolution only begin with them when they fell apart and scattered themselves? Even the *fiancé*, Harold Luscombe, had become like them in the monotony of week-end visits.

She found a large arm-chair in a corner near one of the shining steel fireplaces. It was a long room with a fireplace at each end, grate and fender of burnished steel, after the high art of 1862, grates that were dazzling to look at and radiated heat with absolute ferocity, not even mitigated by the beaded banner screens of the same epoch.

"Now that father's income is a good deal bigger we must make him refurnish this room," Pearl told her cousin, "even if we let him keep his pollard-oak dining-room and library."

"I daresay my uncle likes the things he knew in his childhood," Claudia answered. "I know how my Aunt Louisa loves everything at Altrincham."

Pearl had seated herself on a creepie stool by her cousin, and Algernon, familiarly addressed as "Al," had brought her a small table and all the concomitants of a provincial afternoon tea.

"You must be famished," he said, "after going without your luncheon."

"I had some biscuits in my uncle's office. I'm afraid I prevented his taking luncheon."

"Father seldom takes more than a biscuit. That's why we dine directly after tea," said Pearl, who had previously apologised for the seven o'clock dinner.

"Wasn't Claudia awfully bored by Skepton?" Ruby asked her father, as she took him his tea-cup.

"No, I think not," Mathew answered quietly.

He was standing on the hearthrug by his niece, with his back as near the flaming eye of the semi-circular steel grate as human flesh could venture. "I daresay she is tired, for we were on our feet a long time; but I don't think she was bored."

"No," said Claudia, "I was never in my life so much interested in any thing. I never knew what a clever man my father was till to-day. I never knew what——" She checked herself abruptly as she was going to say "what a good man," for she felt that tears would come with the words, and tears before that concrete family and their visitors would have been too dreadful.

Theodore—known in the family as T.—came to her rescue with a muffin-dish.

"Well, I'm surprised," said Pearl. "Knowing the kind of people and places you are used to I thought Skepton would have bored you to extinction."

"With all those human beings? I am deeply interested in their lives and ways. Skepton is not beautiful; but I think I could come to love the place. It is my kingdom," she added, gravely and almost sadly, remembering her father's words in the last evening they had spent together.

Pearl sat on her creepie stool in silent wonder. Could it be that Skepton, this monotonous iron-town, would make up to Claudia for a life of spinsterhood, that a handsome young woman, whose natural right was to rule at least one subservient man, could be content to go through life in loveless isolation, could console herself with the clubs and swimming-bath and hospitals and alms-houses of Skepton. Could chimneys that

seemed to pierce the skies, and immeasurable acres of slate roofs, fill the void in a woman's heart? Pearl thought not. For the moment Skepton amused her cousin; it was a new toy; and no doubt the sense of power was gratifying.

"I should be no end proud of myself if I owned all Skepton," Pearl thought. "But it can't last. Sooner or later she will want to marry, and then everything will belong to my father and we shall live in Park Lane."

Daneborough and Park Lane! The prospect was dazzling. It was the two fine houses, the prestige and power that Pearl thought of, rather than of the chimneys and stone walls and the wealth that went with them.

Of course Claudia would marry. She was superbly handsome. A red Rayner could admire that Cleopatra kind of beauty, so marked a contrast to the family charms, a something oriental and strange. Of course she would marry. There were plenty of men in the world who would want to marry her for her beauty's sake, and who would think seven hundred a year quite enough with such a bride, at least enough for pin-money. Harold would hardly have seven hundred a year with Ruby, unless Claudia forfeited her fortune, and the family became inordinately rich.

"Inordinately rich! That is what we should be," thought Pearl.

She had questioned her brother Algernon about Claudia's fortune. "I suppose she's immensely rich?"

"Oh, well, she's rich enough to make an honest return on her income-tax paper," he said, "but if she's stingy it'll go against the grain to do it."

"But, Al, how much a year will it all come to—Skepton and my uncle's land?"

"And your uncle's money in the funds, and your uncle's railway stock? And your uncle's Derbyshire farms? Well," said Algernon, with a thoughtful air, "my father comes into seven thousand a year—very handsome on his brother's part—and a very fine income."

"What has father's income to do with Claudia's?"

"If you add a cipher to father's seven thousand you will be pretty near the mark."

"Ah!" exclaimed Pearl, with wide-eyed wonder. "Do you mean that my cousin will have seventy thousand a year?"

"Ker-wite!" answered Algernon, mildly facetious. "Wouldn't she be a nice match for me if she were free to marry?"

And then he added reflectively, "It would have been nearer a hundred thou' if my uncle Ralph hadn't chucked away tens of thousands on his fads."

* * * * * *

Claudia spent a week at Vale Hall, and went about among her people, interested in all that concerned them, their work and their amusements, their sorrows and their joys. It was a new world, a world of bread-winners, where everybody was busy, even the children trudging up and down those monotonous streets to and from school, or running errands for their mothers. Everybody was busy. The shops were mostly of a utilitarian order, crammed with food of all kinds, or with the most substantial kind of drapery, serge and merino, sheets and blankets, woollen stockings and woollen petticoats—a world of wool. The shoemaker's shop-front was piled from floor to ceiling with boots and clogs, mountains of boots, mountains of shoes, all of the same uncompromising material and make.

Claudia went about with her uncle and made herself familiar with the inside of a great many houses, the houses of the elder hands or of the sons or grandsons of the oldest hands, the men who had worked hard for her father or her grandfather. They all paid her reverence as to a queen, their new mistress and patron, but above all as the daughter of that strong stern master whom they had admired and loved, knowing that he was a kindly autocrat, and that nothing that concerned their welfare was indifferent to him. He had given them his thoughts, his inventions, his care. He stood out from the ruck of employers of labour, a king among men.

There was nothing servile in the Skepton manner or speech, indeed, their homage to the new chief was tempered by a familiar air of almost equality, as if the gifts they honoured were personal and individual, and had nothing to do with class distinctions. They told Claudia how they had looked up to her father, and expatiated upon his grand qualities with a rough eloquence that touched her to tears. They had understood him, and loved him, while she, his only daughter, had stood aloof, and had looked at him from the standpoint of her mother's ancient race, a race whose claims to superiority were founded upon deeds that had been done in the historical past, and who could claim no distinguished ancestor since the great Rebellion.

Her beauty delighted her people.

"She looks every inch a queen, doan't she, lass?" said one of the workmen to his wife, with as easy an air as if he had been praising one of his children. "You doan't favour your feyther, miss. You bean't a red Rayner, anyhow—but you're a bonnier wench than any of your cousins up at Vale Hall."

The people amused Claudia, amused and interested her. How different they were from the Mayfair people, with their catch-words and similarity of ideas, the people who all used the same jargon and seemed to be moved by the same springs, and changed their phrases and way of thinking at the same season, as if by common consent, debated and agreed upon in committee. Here the men and women were made of stronger stuff and had all marked characters. Even the sturdy, loud-spoken school-children, from seven years old upwards, showed strong individuality, and were independent and self-opinionated.

She was glad to have come among them. They were so completely alive, they throbbed with such a strong vitality, taking their work and their pleasures with equal earnestness.

"I shall come to Skepton very often," she told her uncle, "and I hope I shall get to understand the people as well as my father did."

Mathew smiled. "I'm afraid you'll never quite

reach his mark," he said. "He was born and bred among them. But I'm glad you mean to come here often; and, of course, you must always come to Vale Hall."

"You are so kind—I shall always be glad to go and see you all; but I must have my own *pied à terre.* I shall get one of your local upholsterers to make some changes in my father's rooms, nothing fine or Mayfairish, and I shall be able to come with just a maid and a footman whenever I like. And now, Uncle Mathew, that I have seen how the people live, I should like to see something of their amusements."

"In that case you can go with my girls to the amateur-theatricals at the recreation rooms this evening."

"Really! Have you amateur actors in Skepton?"

"I should think we have."

"Not among the hands?"

"Decidedly among the hands. We think Joe Stawkley—one of our foremen—as fine a low comedian as any of your London stars, and we have at least half a dozen leading ladies among our young women. You can see the acting to-night, and on Wednesday afternoon, our early-closing day, you can see a swimming competition which is well worth looking at, and on Thursday evening one of our people will lecture on the Missing Link, with lantern illustrations."

"Then some of them go in for science?"

"A good many of them. That sixpenny science series has been such a help to our people. A great many of them are as well posted in Darwin, and Tyndall, and Laing, and Clodd, as you and I."

"Please don't include me, Uncle Mathew. I have only begun to read big books within the last year. I have been trying to learn how to think. It was misery drove me to the philosophers."

"I ought to warn you that we dine at six to-night, so that we may be in time for the performance, which begins at seven."

"Do my cousins always go to see the amateurs?"

"Not they. This is the show performance of the year, in aid of the Children's Hospital. The hands

like to know they can do something for our charities. You will see the hall filled to overflowing. To-night is a big affair. All the élite of Skepton will be in the stalls."

The hall was so full that it seemed to Claudia one closely packed mass of humanity, as she made her way with difficulty to the block of two-and-sixpenny stalls in front of the footlights; and it was embarrassing when, before she could seat herself, this mass of humanity rose as if by one common impulse and a stentorian cheer shook the electric lamps hanging on slender chains from the white and gold ceiling.

She had been quite unprepared for such a demonstration; but she turned and faced the excited masses, tall and slim and marble pale in her severe black gown.

"I ought not to have come to a public entertainment so soon after my father's death," she said to her uncle, "but I wanted to see how much pleasure can come into their lives."

The play was the *Spitalfields Weaver*, which gave wide scope for the talent of the Skepton comedian. His portion of the dialogue might have been Swahili for anything the words conveyed to Claudia. It was only West Riding Yorkshire, broadened and exaggerated by the local star. The audience were convulsed with mirth; and even Claudia was able to laugh heartily at the man's facial expression and by-play when speech was incomprehensible. Never was actor more enthusiastically applauded. Certain passages were encored, and the respectable manufacturer Brown, and his patrician wife, had to suppress themselves altogether, and just stand by, while their vulgar visitor gave loose to his feelings and expanded the text ad libitum, with here and there a sly allusion to local politics that pleased the pit. With the exception of two rows of two-and-sixpenny stalls the auditorium was all pit.

The front places were filled chiefly by the learned professions, the senior and junior clergy of Skepton, with their wives and families, the doctors and their assistants, and the local solicitors and their head

clerks, and these all seemed great admirers of the Skepton favourite. Indeed there was hardly one of them who did not believe that, given a London manager clever enough to seize his opportunity and persuade Joe Stawkley to renounce bolts and nuts for the professional stage, he would indubitably take the town by storm.

"There's a freshness about Joe," said the senior curate of St. Jude's, "a sincerity and *abandon* that you'd never get out of an over-trained London actor."

Harold Luscombe yawned a weary assent. His betrothed had made him stay at Skepton a night longer than he intended, in order to assist at this performance. He had been compelled to imperil his digestion by a six o'clock dinner, and to give up a valuable bit of devilling, to please his sultana, who could never be brought to see the advantage of unremunerated work; although he gave her to understand that with luck he might devil his way to the wool-sack.

The *Weaver* was followed by the third act of *The Ticket-of-Leave Man*, in which Stawkley played the detective, while Bob Brierly was represented by the leading light among the Skepton actresses, a large fair girl who was rather too buxom to look her best in male attire, but who, in the opinion of local critics, had an A1 voice, and was able to bellow her impassioned speeches better than any chap in Skepton.

Bellow she did accordingly; and the performance closed amid tumults of applause and a shower of crocus and snowdrop bouquets. It was too early for the prolific daffodil, or the gaudy tulip, but crocuses served their purpose as symbols of approval, and made compact little bunches that were easy to "chook," and had been known to give the recipient a black eye.

CHAPTER XI.

It was a curious change from the exuberant life in Skepton to the quiet of the great house in Derbyshire, where the subdued speech of her highly-trained servants seemed strange to Claudia after the strong ring of the West Riding voices, voices that were so tremendously alive. She found her Aunt Louisa waiting for her at the small rustic station with affectionate welcome. Sooth to say that cordial greeting hurt her a little, since some of her most troubled thoughts of late had been about her aunt.

How was she to get rid of her? That was the cruel question which she had been debating on the homeward journey, in the silence of a reserved compartment.

She had accepted the good lady's chaperonage at her father's insistence, because, since she must have somebody, Lady Louisa seemed more tolerable than an accomplished stranger of the prunes and prism class. But she was her own mistress now, and could stand up for her independence. She felt years older since her father's death—other years added on to those years that had aged her in her day of mourning for her mother—a sudden change from girlhood to joyless womanhood. The clause in her father's will had set her in a class apart, almost as if she were a lady abbess, like those great ladies of the old *régime* who were created abbesses without ever having been nuns.

What could she want with chaperon or sheep dog, she who was guarded by barriers of gold, fairy gold

that would turn to dead leaves were she ever to yield to the pleading of a lover ?

"As if there were any fear of my meeting the man for whom I would give up my kingdom," she thought.

She was very proud of her kingdom. The vision of those monotonous streets that had once been so terrible — row after row of dark grey houses, tier above tier of roofs and chimney-pots on the steep slope towards the moor—had now become pleasant to her. Mathew Rayner had taken her up and down some of those long streets on a Sunday afternoon, her last afternoon at Skepton, and had shown her the gas-lit parlours where the families were sitting at tea, the look of jovial life and abundant food, the broad smiles, the hearty voices, audible through those swing sashes that had once been a grievance to the inmates. He had shown her happy people, the industrial life at its best, the paternal government that cared for the present and the future of its children.

"He must be a wonderful man for whom I would surrender Skepton," she told herself.

Everybody must by this time have read or heard of the condition on which her fortune was held. There had been the usual publicity, and hardly a newspaper in Great Britain had omitted its paragraph headed "Eccentric Will of a Quadruple Millionaire," or something equally appetising to the impecunious reader. This was the only thing that galled her. It was horrible to know that all her acquaintance, and thousands of people she had never seen, would discuss her destiny, speculate about her feelings and inclinations, and perhaps even pity her, and talk of her father's cruelty. Or would some among them remember the inquest on her brother, and read between the lines of that strange clause, and believe that in her, as in the Free Friar, there was a strain of madness which the father knew and feared ?

Not for one moment had she herself been afraid of that ancestral taint. The strong brain was conscious of its own power. Nothing in the story of the past could frighten her.

But the immediate question upon which her thoughts dwelt during the homeward journey had been how to get rid of Lady Louisa, harmless and amiable Lady Louisa, who had established her household gods, her relics and treasures, in Park Lane, and would think it a hard thing to have to move them all, even the family portraits which she had assured Claudia were in a better light than they had ever enjoyed in her microscopic dining-room near the sky.

"Gold, gold, gold," thought Miss Kilmansegg. There was nothing for it but gold. Gold must gild the pill of dismissal, gold and caressing speech, and all that a niece who liked her aunt immensely in moderate doses but could not stand her as a life-companion, might show of love and dutifulness.

"If I let her stay it would be for life," Claudia thought. "It was not as if I were going to marry, and could shake her off on my wedding-day."

Aunt and niece were sitting at tea in the drawing-room presently, with the three dogs, Rag rapturous and almost hysterical, Chieftain pleased but more inclined to romp about the room for his own diversion than to devote himself to his mistress, Marron a little more exuberant than his daily wont, but soon tranquillised and lying down in a superb attitude with his paws crossed, displaying his silver bangles, which Lady Louisa's maid had restored to him, together with his silver collar.

"Bentley fancied he had been rather neglected," Lady Louisa said when Claudia noticed the bangles.

"I left them off because I thought they were unmanly."

"Oh, but they make him look three times as valuable a dog. And the dear beast is so fond of them."

Lady Louisa professed herself eager to hear her niece's opinion of Skepton. She wanted to know about those interesting iron people, and the clang of the wooden shoon. Did they all wear clogs? Were any of them strikers or nihilists? Would Claudia find it a difficult property to manage?

She questioned her niece eagerly; but Claudia

fancied that she did not listen when her questions were answered. She had an air that was at once excited and preoccupied. She was very smartly dressed, in the most frivolous order of mourning.

"Your poor father did not say anything about my wearing mourning for him, indeed, it would have been strange if he had, seeing that my name was not even mentioned in his will," concluded Lady Louisa, betwixt sarcasm and pathos.

"Dear aunt, my father knew I should present you with some souvenir."

"My dear, I am not complaining, I have no desire of being a gainer—but I confess that I was mortified at being so completely ignored. His wife's sister! So near a tie! It hurt me a little when I read the will in the *Illustrated London News*. As to his treatment of you, Claudia, I won't venture to express my opinion."

"Don't, aunt, don't say one word against my father. I am content to obey him. I shall never complain."

"Not if a day should come when you meet the man for whose sake you could give up all this world contains——"

"If ever such a man should appear I suppose I shouldn't mind giving up my fortune," Claudia said, laughing at her aunt's intensity.

Lady Louisa, fat and placid and of the world worldly, had never before exhibited the sentimental side of her character. Claudia was in better spirits since her visit to Skepton, and she felt that there were things in life that could provoke laughter.

"You would be better off than me even then," said her aunt, "for you would have seven hundred a year to fall back upon, while I have only my six hundred *pour tout potage*."

"You shall have a deeper soup-tureen in future, Aunt Louisa. My father's will has made me preposterously rich, and you must let me add a thousand to your six hundred. I shall be very unhappy if you refuse."

Lady Louisa responded with a hysterical sob that roused Rag and set him barking at her, which made a

slight diversion, and gave time for tears to be dried while the terrier was being reproved.

"My dearest Claudia, this offer of yours is too generous for words, and it comes to me at a crisis that makes your noble offer doubly, trebly, precious to me. A thousand a year? But can you really spare so much out of your hundred thousand?"

"That sounds like satire, aunt. Of course I could spare it, or more if you want more."

"More! my dear girl! More! No, Claudia, I will not refuse your generous gift."

This was said with a heroic air, more suitable to renunciation than acceptance; and indeed in that moment of exalted feeling Lady Louisa felt as if she were renouncing something considerable—the pride of the Saffords.

"But what is the crisis, aunt? I hope nothing painful."

"No, not altogether painful; a strange sweet blending of pain and joy. Let me give you another cup of tea, dear. I have oceans to tell you."

Claudia took Rag on her lap, which was against rules, and settled herself to hear a meandering account of some family grievance; some slight or shortcoming of her married aunts in their dealings with the spinster sister.

Lady Louisa brought the cup of tea to the table by her niece's side and coaxed her to take this or that of the daintinesses on the tea-table.

"I want you to be quite, quite comfy before I begin my story," she said, with a kind of skittishness that was new.

"I am not in a hurry, for I can see that it isn't a doleful story," Claudia said gaily, allowing Rag to lick her cheek, just a little, after their parting. "I was afraid your sisters might have been giving you trouble."

A sudden cloud came over Lady Louisa's smiling countenance.

"No, they know nothing yet," she said. "No doubt they will make themselves as disagreeable as they possibly can when they do know."

"Aunt, this is too mysterious. What on earth is there for them to know?"

"Claudia, when you left this house a fortnight ago if a professional palmist or crystal-gazer had told me that I was about to take a step that would involve a total change in my destiny I should have accused her of obtaining money under false pretences."

"And you would have been wrong?" questioned Claudia. "The crystal-gazer would have earned her fee honestly?"

"She would have seen two people standing at the altar—two people who a month before had been almost strangers—not boy and girl lovers—the woman of mature years—the man some three or four, or possibly five or six, years her junior."

"Ten," thought Claudia, wise by experience of unequal matches among her acquaintance, and then she cried with surprise that had a joyous ring, "Aunt, you are going to be married! That is astounding."

"Oh, come, my dear, there is nothing exactly supernatural in a woman—who is not quite forty—thinking of marriage."

"No, no, of course not. And I should be charmed to think of you married to a good man—whom you could really like."

Claudia could not think of anything warmer than "liking" at her aunt's age.

"A man I can revere and almost adore," sighed Lady Louisa.

"But, aunt, who is he? It is so inexplicably sudden! Is he one of Uncle Altrincham's friends—someone you met at Christmas?"

"Someone I met before Christmas—under saddest circumstances. Oh, Claudia, is it possible you don't guess? When I say that I revere him."

"I can't think of anybody in this neighbourhood—unless he were General Lowther, and you say he is your junior, so it can't be the General."

"That gouty old thing! How could you suggest such an idea? I wonder you should have a moment's uncertainty, knowing Wilfred Lauriston as you do."

"Mr. Lauriston! Oh, aunt!"

"Why, oh? Is he not a gentleman?"

"Yes, of course. But really, aunt, you said three or four years younger."

"Or five or six, I added."

"Surely Mr. Lauriston must be at least twelve years younger than you."

"I do not know the precise difference, Claudia, for after I had refused him twice upon the ground of disparity in years nothing could induce him to tell me his actual age. 'If *that* is to part us,' he said, 'you shall *never* know.' But of one thing I am assured, namely, that though in years I may have the advantage he is my equal in mind."

Claudia thought, with a touch of sadness, that as much might have been predicated about the average lad of fifteen.

"If you can really be happy with him, aunt, I shall rejoice in your marriage. I believe that Mr. Lauriston is quite good and nice. My father had a high opinion of him—and—he was very kind to my mother, during those last sad months. I ought to like him, remembering that."

And then she could but think how that difficult problem of Lady Louisa's suppression had been solved as if by an interposition of Providence, a god out of a machine, in the shape of the Reverend Wilfred Lauriston, B.A. of Cambridge, whom she had always thought of as a kindly and not over intelligent young man, eminently adapted to his social environment, and steadfast in fulfilling all the duties of that state of life to which he had been called.

Lady Louisa at the Vicarage would be delightful; so completely different from Lady Louisa as an inevitable presence in the Daneborough drawing-room, someone with whom it was brutal not to play at least two games of bezique or one double patience in the course of every evening. What was there that Claudia would not do for a Lady Louisa established at the Vicarage?

She put Rag off her knee, and went over to the sofa where her expansive aunt was sitting, and sat next her, and took her hand, and kissed her affectionately.

"Dear aunt, will it make you happy?" she murmured. "That is the important question. Are you sure you can be happy with Mr. Lauriston?"

"Happy with him! Oh, Claudia, I never knew what happiness meant till I knew that Wilfred loved me."

Poor Aunt Louisa—thirty-nine, or, according to the Peerage, forty-one years of age, and with less than a fortnight's experience of happiness! Claudia listened to her as if she had been hearing the naïve babble of a child.

"You know how I was kept under as a young girl, and how when my sisters were all married I was made to feel that it was my duty to stop at home and air my father's *Times*, and pour out the tea for my mother. They seemed to forget that I might have a heart like the others. I think my heart must have been frozen in all those colourless years," said Lady Louisa, forgetting more than one romantic passion that had been fed upon dreams, and never suspected by its object, "and it was strange that it should thaw at the sound of his dear voice—asking me—oh, so modestly, with such reverent upward-looking love—to be his wife. *His* wife! Oh, Claudia, if you could know the refinement, the spirituality of his nature—the solemn depth of his soul—you would not wonder that I am as proud of being chosen by him as if he were the Premier Duke."

And then she went on to explain that her future husband was very well connected. He had an uncle by marriage who was an admiral; and his great grandfather on his mother's side had been member for Wadebridge in the good old days before the Reform Bill. "And no member of the family has ever been in trade," Lady Louisa added exultingly.

"Then I conclude," said the owner of an iron town, "that they are poor."

Claudia could not spare her aunt this home-thrust. The commercial spirit of her Rayner ancestors overcame the Safford pride.

"They are not rich," replied Lady Louisa, as if describing a well-known middle-state.

"My dear aunt, I hope you will be tremendously happy. I think you were made for a vicar's wife. You are so kind and so placid. You will be a peace-maker, not a stirrer-up of strife. And I know how good you will be to the poor."

"I hope I may always remember how good Providence has been to me in giving me Wilfred," said Lady Louisa meekly.

"I never thought when my father was building the Vicarage that an aunt of mine was going to live in it. I daresay you know that it is an exact copy of the Rectory at Bolton Abbey."

"Yes, he told me. His furniture is Early Victorian, and not worthy of such a picturesque house. His widowed mother left it to him. He was an only child, dear lamb, and he had a lonely boyhood, a boyhood of plain thoughts and high living," murmured Lady Louisa blandly, unconscious of misplaced epithets.

"You have all your pretty furniture in London, aunt, and your bric-à-brac will make the Vicarage lovely," said Claudia, "and you must let me furnish one or two rooms for you."

"That is too, too dear of you! I own that his dining-room side-board and chairs would get on my nerves if I had to see them every day."

And then she told her niece that she had ventured to ask Mr. Lauriston to dinner, in order that he might open his mind to Claudia in a little confidential talk, from which Lady Louisa would discreetly absent herself.

"Nothing could be more æsthetic, more purely twelfth century, than the church, and the organ is perfect," she said, "but the service is sadly plain. I think it has preyed upon Wilfred's mind that he has not been able to lift things to a higher level; and I hope that now the church belongs to you he may be allowed a free hand."

But here Claudia became adamant.

"My father built the church and endowed it, and I could not countenance any change in the ritual he loved," she said.

"Oh," exclaimed her aunt, and was on the verge

of adding that the opinions of a man who only went to church once a week ought hardly to be regarded in a parish where the really good people were constant at matins and even-song; but the thought of Claudia's liberal promises checked her.

A thousand a year was not to be jeopardised.

"If Mr. Lauriston takes a little more trouble with his choir the services will be good enough for anybody," said Claudia.

"He puts his whole heart into everything that concerns the Church. But I know he yearns to see those bare stone walls glowing with colour, and if he could see the Stations of the Cross——"

"He must wait for that till he is promoted to a better living. I mean to keep things as my father left them."

Lady Louisa thought her niece pig-headed, but gratitude forbade her saying so.

CHAPTER XII.

CLAUDIA was surprised one morning by the arrival of a most unwelcome visitor.

She had not seen her brother's widow since the bitter day of Michael's funeral, when they had stood side by side in the group of mourners at the door of the mausoleum. Something in Ralph Rayner's manner on that day, a frozen calm, a rigid avoidance, had told Lucile that the bond between her and her father-in-law was broken, and it hardly needed the letter that was put into her hand on the following day as she was leaving Daneborough to emphasize the fact of their estrangement.

"We met yesterday before the eyes of the world, and it was not possible for me to escape the pain of seeing you. I shall think of you to my dying day as the woman who might have made my son happy, and who made him miserable; and to my dying day I shall believe that his blood lies at your door. You will understand, therefore, that it is far better we should never again meet.

"You have no material benefit to expect from me now or in the future. You are amply provided for by your marriage settlement; and it will rest with you whether your widowed life or your second marriage will be an honour or a disgrace to your people. Nothing that can happen to you will make any difference to me.

"RALPH RAYNER."

Lucile had accepted this as final. She had five

thousand a year, which seemed a pittance, measured against the possible hundred thousand of her sister-in-law. She could never again enjoy the luxury of wastefulness; although her father pretended to think her rich, and insinuated that she might help him now and then with a "monkey" when he was in what he called "a tight place," after an unlucky Ascot or Sandown.

"A young widow without chick or child can do wonders on a couple of thou', and you ought to save more than half your income," he said. "When your first mourning is over you'll be living about in other people's houses. You'll have nothing to spend except upon servants and travelling, and your Paris dressmaker. Everybody will want to have you—a pretty widow, with a jointure that you don't forfeit by marrying. But you'll be a fool if you marry again, unless it is to better yourself. You are young enough to make a magnificent match."

Lucile's widowhood so far had given no ground for scandal. She had gone back to the house in Curzon Street after a winter in Italy, where she lived quietly at Florence with an ancient cousin, also a widow, and saw the best English society in a very exclusive way, appearing at the afternoon teas and evening *causeries* in her cousin's spacious saloon, with its painted ceiling and five long windows, but going to no parties. It was a rainy winter, and she found Florence depressing, and was glad to get to Cannes in February, where she had herds of friends, and began to see more people, and in May she went back to the house in Curzon Street, the house where one room on the upper floor held a vision so ghastly that she had felt that a good long absence was necessary before she could bear even the other rooms in the really charming house.

It was her own house, a part of her dowry, and she was proud of it. Of course into that one room on the floor over her bedroom she would never again enter. She would have given much if she could have made some structural change in it, so that it should never seem the same room. At one time she had

thought of dividing it into three cubicles for servants, but she reflected that they would be sure to find out all about the thing of dread that had happened there, and would pretend that they saw ghosts or heard unearthly noises. It was better simply to leave the room as a place for which nobody had any use, and she hoped that the horror of it in her own mind, on those bad nights when she lay awake looking up at the ceiling, would wear itself out in time.

She made no attempt at reconciliation after Mr. Rayner's letter. She had trembled before him in the tempest of his passion after his son's death. The livid face, the terror of the man's aspect, were more dreadful in her memory than even that ghastly spectacle on the upper floor.

There were very unpleasant memories attached to the house in Curzon Street; but as it was quite the most perfect house of its kind, and her own property, she was determined to live in it.

* * * * * *

It was an hour before luncheon, and Claudia had come in from a walk with her dogs when Mrs. Rayner was announced, and came fluttering into the morning-room in all the gracefulness of her second mourning, and in perfect beauty.

"I have been doing a cure at Matlock Bath," she said, "and I felt that I could not be so near without coming to see you. I drove to the mausoleum on my way. It is a sweet spot, and I laid some lilies of the valley on the steps—my favourite flower. Oh, there is that most exquisite dog—dear Lady Magdalen's poodle! I wonder you can bear to have him with you, Claudia. He must remind you of your loss."

"I am not afraid to remember my dead. I like to think of them."

"How strange it seems to be in this house," Lucile said, looking round the room.

"I believe you never liked it."

"I used to say it was triste. I think a house in a big park is always triste. The White House is ideal. And they are both yours, aren't they? And the won-

derful tapestries, the pictures and china, and the old Georgian plate that people used to rave about at your father's dinners. What a mountain of wealth for one young woman to possess. You must feel overburdened, almost crushed by it."

"I am not conscious of my burden. I find no difference in the houses I have lived in for the last fourteen years—simply because they belong to me."

"Don't you? I thought you must feel a sense of responsibility. And your iron-works—a whole town of them! It seems such an extraordinary thing for a girl of five-and-twenty to own iron-works."

"If my brother had lived there would have been no question of my owning them."

"No. I suppose your father would have heaped up everything upon Michael. And yet he forgot to mention Michael's widow in his will, for so much as the gift of a mourning ring."

The two women were sitting on each side of the fireplace, with the dogs lying about the rug between them. Claudia rose impetuously and disconcerted the dogs.

"You ought not to talk of my father's will. There would have been little chance of his forgetting you if you had made his son happy."

"It is quite too cruel of you to talk as if I had made him unhappy. You must know that there was an eccentric twist in his mind. Your father ought never to have interfered with his idea of a vocation. Michael was a saint. He ought never to have married. Just for our honeymoon, while he seemed absolutely to adore me, we were happy enough, but the eccentric strain very soon showed itself. He was horribly unkind! He grudged me the clothes I wore—because there were starving wretches in London slums. If there were many people with his ideas all the money in London would go to the slums, and everybody at the West-end would be hard-up. There must be some reason in things. If one subscribes to all the charities one has done quite enough."

"Pray don't talk of my brother. It hurts me to hear you."

"It hurts me to hear you talk as if he were a victim."

"He was a victim—the victim of his blind love for an empty-headed girl," Claudia answered passionately. "Why, a dog would have loved him better, would have been more grateful for his love than you were. What did you ever do to make his life happy? What did you ever do to atone to him for the things he had given up for your sake—the most precious things on earth or in heaven, as he counted them?"

"He was a fanatic—always a fanatic," sobbed Lucile, "and at the end he was mad. If his death wasn't an accident—he was mad. He had been mad for days before that dreadful morning. Your father must have thought so—or he would never have made that cruel condition in his will—horribly cruel for you."

"Don't speak of my father. His heart was broken."

"And I was to blame. It was all my fault."

"Yes, it was your fault. You might have made my brother happy. You were too selfish, too self-absorbed, to care for the things he cared for, to have one thought or one desire in sympathy with him. You were the new beauty that people talked about; the pretty Mrs. Rayner whom everybody wanted. That was your mission in life, and you cared for nothing else. I watched you when you were in this house with my brother in the Easter holidays. It bored you to be away from the scene of your triumphs. It bored you to go to church with him, or to go for walks with him. You talked of nothing but your society engagements, the gowns you were going to wear, the great people you were going to meet. Your shallow prattle drove his thoughts inward, and he fell back upon old dreams, the dreams that had been so dear."

"I never thought you would be so unsisterly," murmured Lucile, drying her tears. "Please order my fly at once. I told the man to go round to the stables, as I thought I might be staying to luncheon. My train doesn't go till a quarter past three, but I can

wait at the station. I suppose there must be some kind of waiting-room with a fire."

"Of course you must stop to luncheon. I don't want to quarrel with you. Why should we quarrel? The past is past. Hard words can't alter that."

"If you knew all the circumstances you would not think so unkindly of me. But I do want to be friends with you, Claudia, and I must congratulate you on your splendid position, such an exceptional position."

"Yes, I suppose it is exceptional."

"But no doubt it is hard lines for you not to be allowed to marry."

"I am not likely to find that hard. I have never seen the man I would care to marry."

"Stick to that, Claudia. There is nothing sweeter for a woman than liberty."

Lucile was thinking of her house in Curzon Street, and all the things she meant to do in the coming season, her second year of widowhood; nothing improper, nothing even risqué, but chic, every little entertainment of the newest and most alluring kind, the choicest music, the choicest flowers, the choicest food, the choicest people. She could afford to spend three-fourths of her income in the London season. Marienbad and other people's houses would provide for the rest of the year. She had laid out her life in fireside hours in her sitting-room in the Matlock hotel, where her cure had been rather a caprice than a necessity, complexion-worship rather than pursuit of health.

She had hated Daneborough in those Easter holidays Claudia had talked of, but to-day she was impressed, almost overawed, by the house and its surroundings, considered as Claudia's property. To think that one young woman should possess all these things! The room in which she was sitting, Lady Magdalen's morning-room, would have almost swallowed the house in Curzon Street. And the park, and the farms, wide pastures stretching over hills and across fertile valleys, old homesteads and new homesteads, were all Claudia's!

"And you have your mother's diamonds?" she asked presently, following her own line of thought.

"Yes, I have my mother's diamonds."

"I suppose if Michael had lived your father would have made some of them heirlooms?"

"Very likely."

"If I should go to a drawing-room next May—I believe that as a point of etiquette I ought to go—will you let me wear Lady Magdalen's tiara? It is ever so much handsomer than mine."

"With pleasure."

"That is quite too sweet of you. One's things can't be too good at a drawing-room. People have such eyes, and such tongues! And the newspapers are insatiable."

"I think you must have been sickened by newspaper praises two years ago," said Claudia.

"Oh, I got to hate those everlasting paragraphs about my frocks—and my being in great beauty! Such a queer old-fashioned expression! And directly I begin to go out a little, and to receive a few friends, I shall be persecuted by the same chorus of twaddle. No one can escape it nowadays."

"Does anyone want to escape it?" asked Claudia. "I have been told that the greatest people in the land are displeased if their most trivial proceedings are not chronicled."

CHAPTER XIII.

Lady Louisa's marriage took place on the Monday before Ash Wednesday, a quiet wedding, to which only relations and close friends were bidden ; but there was a tea-party on the previous Saturday, a tea-party for all the eligibles within motor distance, and for all the really nice people in Daneborough, on which occasion the presents were to be on view in the deserted billiard-room.

"I would not for worlds offend any of Wilfred's parishioners," Lady Louisa said, when she insinuated the idea of a tea-party, and Claudia assented cheerfully.

There was to be a big treat for the commonalty on Shrove Tuesday—sports in the park, a dinner for the old people, a tea for the children ; but Claudia had pleaded her mourning as a reason for not inviting the "place" people and the "villa" people to her aunt's wedding, and Lady Louisa had agreed that for a bridegroom of Wilfred's sacred calling a quiet wedding was best.

"It will be the most solemn day of my life since mamma's funeral," she said, "but I think Wilfred's nice parishioners ought to be allowed to see the presents—so many of them being their own gifts."

So the cards were sent out, and the neighbourhood gathered in all its might, to gloat over the cigarette-boxes, and sermon-cases, the "Imitation" in antique calf, the "Christian Year" in vellum, the studs and sleeve-links, umbrellas and sticks, photograph frames and book troughs, chosen for the bridegroom ; and

the Venetian liqueur glasses, silver candle-sticks, sugar basins and fruit-dishes, Crown Derby coffee-cups, point lace cushion-covers, and Dresden bonbon-boxes, presented to the bride.

In every local countenance there was the same keen searchlight, as the company moved slowly round the billiard-table, everyone looking for his or her own offering, and almost everyone offended at the insignificant position awarded to the gift.

Lady Delabole and Lady Sedgedale had come to Daneborough, disapprovingly, each with her "girl," who was to be bridesmaid, and each of those ladies took care to inform anyone they knew among the "place" people—the "villa" people were out of the question—that it was rather dreadful to think of Louisa making an idiot of herself by marrying a parson who was at least ten years her junior and whom nobody had ever heard of.

"He is not a pushing person, and he seems ready to sink into the earth when one speaks to him," said the Marchioness, "and I can only think that Louisa must have insisted upon his marrying her."

Lady Sedgedale thought as Claudia was going to provide for her aunt they ought to be civil; for, after all, it was rather a blessing to get Louisa settled in a nice rural vicarage, rather than to have her living alone on her fifth-floor and always grumbling about being neglected by her family.

The two girls were handsome, and of the fashionable height, six feet at least, and looked imposing in pink velvet and sable, with bunches of rosebuds in their fur toques. They were the only grown-up bridesmaids, and giggled through the greater part of the service, especially when Aunt Louisa's finger proved too plump for the ring. There were two children—boy and girl from the neighbourhood—whom the Reverend Wilfred had held at the font five years before, who assiduously tumbled over Lady Louisa's court train, which covered about half the length of the nave. The church was full of lookers-on, and everybody said it was a sweet wedding, and would long be remembered at Daneborough, where Lady Louisa would be an

acquisition to all ranks of society, from the local duke to the incurables in the infirmary.

In the words of the *Daneborough Times:* "The newly-wedded pair left Daneborough House in time for the 4.30 train to Derby, en route for Malvern, where the honeymoon is to be spent. Lady Louisa Lauriston's going-away gown was violet velvet with toque to match, while for the journey she wore a white cloth cloak trimmed with silver fox and lined with white satin."

"She was a great deal too fine," pronounced the Marchioness. "Why in heaven's name, Claudia, did you give her that sumptuous cloak? Do you think it's the sort of thing for driving about the lanes in a governess-cart?"

"I hope she will have something better than a governess-cart."

"Oh, yes, by the way. That's your present, isn't it —a French victoria and a pair of cobs? What it is to have a millionaire niece! I wonder what you'll give my girl when she marries."

"Give me Marron, Claudia, if you want to make me your slave for life," said six feet of girlhood lying at full length on the Persian rug, worshipping the brown poodle, "he's the coldest-hearted dog I ever knew, but his beauty makes me glad."

"Get up this instant, Dora. How dare you spoil that most expensive frock?"

"Spoil it or not, I suppose I shall have to wear it half the season," said Dora, springing up with youth's delightful elasticity, and shaking out her plumes. "It doesn't fit half as well as Frederica's. Marcelle ought to be ashamed of herself."

"Marcelle complains that you never will stand still to be fitted."

"Marcelle complains because I have only two frocks a year from her, and my maid makes all the rest of my clothes. Marcelle only cares for the women who pay her once in three years—by hook or by crook—and never look at their bills. Those are what she calls good customers."

"And we all know who Hook and Crook are,"

interjected Frederica, who was lying on a sofa reading a French novel.

The house party melted away on Shrove Tuesday, before the sports and the dinner began, and Claudia was free to go among the people and make sure of their happiness. Her aunt was gone. She was free, quite free, and quite alone. But she was not afraid of solitude now that she had Skepton and its innumerable humanity to think about—all those eager men and women and children, fellow-creatures, so real, so intensely alive!

She accepted Mrs. Rayner's invitation to spend Easter at Vale Hall, and it was during this visit that she gave herself an entirely new experience, and for the first time in her life stood upon a platform, face to face with a crowded audience, and felt her nerves thrilling at the sound of public applause. At Mathew Rayner's request she consented to take part in the entertainment at the recreation rooms, an annual event on Easter Tuesday, always looked forward to with eager interest by the workpeople, and an entertainment in which the two classes—professional and labour—took almost equal part. The clergy told each other that it was a meritorious and Christian act to assist in the show, as it brought rich and poor together, and for that one evening class-distinctions were forgotten. But from this point of view the entertainment might be regarded as supererogatory, since in Skepton class-distinctions were not often remembered.

The performance, though planned with infinite care, could not boast of originality in scheme or arrangement. There was the usual mixture of songs and recitations, a German ballad by Veronica, a violin solo by Pearl, with piano accompaniment by a musical curate, a comic duet by the parish doctor and his wife, a recitation in the West Riding vernacular by one of the workpeople, and duets and part-songs by factory girls. The entertainment was to conclude with a solo clog dance, that would have jeopardised the safety of anything but the most substantial platform.

"You could give our people a great deal of pleasure on Tuesday evening, if you liked, Claudia," her uncle

said at the Sunday luncheon, while she sat by his side, in the shadow of the sirloin.

And then he told her that many of the people had asked him if Miss Rayner was going to give them a song or a recitation.

"Summaat as 'ud show what stoof she's got in her knowledge-box," said Algernon, in the words of Joe Stawkley, the Skepton comedian.

"Your father used to give them a speech if he was here at Easter," Mathew said, "one of his rattling good speeches—familiar and friendly—hitting them up sharply about any little matter that had been giving trouble, but always genial, and always applauded to the echo. If there were a sprinkling of malcontents they knew it was best to keep quiet. Now if you would give them a bit of a recitation or a reading, they would be delighted, for they all want to see the young "missus." That's what they call you, when they don't call you Ralph Rayner's lass. There's a good deal of jealousy about the people you got acquainted with in January, and this would give them all a chance, you see. They all want to see and hear you."

"Do you think it would really please them—even if I were only half audible—or if I broke down from stage-fright?"

"You would please them beyond measure—even if you broke down. But I'm not afraid of that. There's no better audience than a Yorkshire audience. They're so quick to understand—and—well—when there's a handsome face—they're so quick to excuse shortcomings."

"I've done plenty of amateur acting in my time—before smart audiences—awfully bored audiences, I believe; but in that great hall, with a close-packed crowd, it would be different. I should hardly know my own voice."

"You must hear your own voice there beforehand. You can try to-morrow morning when Pearl and Veronica are rehearsing."

"And my father has often stood upon that platform and talked to his people—as a friend," Claudia said, deeply interested.

"Very often. You know he generally came to us in the Easter holidays."

"Yes, I know, while my mother and I had a big house party at Daneborough, and a lawn meet, the same kind of thing Easter after Easter. I think I should like to take part in the show, Uncle Mathew, and to say a few words to my father's people. They are *his* people, you know—they always will be. Death makes no difference."

She spent Monday morning at the hall with her cousins. The rehearsal amused her beyond measure, for the mixture of rough labour and provincial gentility afforded curious contrasts. Everybody was friendly, and rough labour was in no wise embarrassed by contact with the learned professions, and asserted its opinions and stuck to its text with a terrible courage. There was a good deal of squabbling about the order of precedence, and nobody wanted to begin the entertainment, since the first number in the programme would be inaudible in the shuffling of feet and whispering and giggling, as the audience settled themselves in their places; but this difficulty was met by Ruby's *fiancé* who suggested that the doors should be shut for five minutes before the entertainment began, and not opened again for stragglers until the first performer had finished; whereupon Ruby generously volunteered to start the performance with an extra solo.

"As if there baint enough o' that domned catgoot scre-aping a'ready," said one of the labour party.

Claudia tried the acoustic capacity of the hall, which had been built specially for sound, and Ruby's *fiancé*, who was indefatigable and ubiquitous, proclaimed in a stentorian voice from the back of the auditorium, as of a stalwart sailor hailing a distant ship, that he could hear every syllable; and this being so, the rest seemed easy.

"I think if you will let me sit at the piano, and accompany my recitation with just a little occasional music," she told Dr. Stormer, the stage-manager, "it would be easier for me," an idea which that polite practitioner welcomed as an inspiration of genius.

"I remember Clifford Harrison's recitations," Claudia said, "they made me in love with poetry when I was a child. Of course my performance will be a very poor imitation of a great master, but I shan't venture far."

When the night came her heart warmed to her work. She was to have only one entrance, to occupy the platform as long as she liked, and to leave off when she liked.

At the first glimpse of the tall figure in a black satin gown—the dazzling shoulders and arms, the small neat head and rich hair, the dark eyes, deep and thoughtful, there arose a storm of applause. She curtseyed, and then stood erect and still, while they applauded again and again, insatiable in their ardour; then she curtseyed again, and seated herself at the piano, looking at them quietly with those unfathomable eyes, thinking how her father had created this world for her, this mass of people who loved her, knowing nothing about her except that she was his daughter.

She played one of Chopin's shortest, simplest nocturnes, dreamily, with her broad strong touch, well trained by a famous German master. She was not tremendous in technique or aspiring to a professional skill, but Heaven had given her a fine ear and an unfailing memory. And then she recited Wordsworth's ode on the "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood."

It was a little over their heads perhaps, she thought, but it gave opportunities for musical accompaniment, now a strain of Mozart's church music, celestial, uplifting, and then joyous pastoral melodies—the peasant's pipe and tabor, the skylark and the nightingale, the sighing of the wind in the forest, the roll of far-off thunder, the light laughter of the child, the deep thoughts of the man. She remembered, or she extemporised, strains that illustrated every change of feeling.

"That were summaat rale foine," one of the men told his neighbour; "it be a bit high, and wa'ants thinkin' oot, but it's grand."

And now she broke suddenly into martial music, "British Grenadiers," "Garryowen," "The Girl I Left Behind Me," and then, changing her note to sadness, she recited "The Burial of Sir John Moore," very slowly, playing the Dead March from "Saul," and speaking through the music. Then, amidst a storm of applause, she played "Rule, Britannia," and invited them to join in a chorus, which they did with patriotic frenzy.

She rose to acknowledge their applause, and came to the centre of the platform smiling down at the eager faces, ruddy and shining in the bright light.

"Speech," cried the nearer ranks, with one voice, when they saw her standing there.

"Speech, speech!" was yelled from the back of the hall.

"I can't give you a speech," she said, when the gentilities had cried "order" and the labour party had shouted their fill, "but I should like to tell you a story—just a child's story—an old story that I daresay a good many of you know as well as I do; but it is a story I love, the story of the Ugly Duck—written by a man who was an ugly duck himself when he began life."

Tremendous applause, and a general settling down to listen, with murmurs of "t'oogly doock!" a name familiar and dear to most of the juvenile audience.

And then, with a grace and gaiety that charmed them, she told them something of Hans Andersen's history, and how the peasant had come to be the adored of the people and the guest and chosen friend of kings, and how our own Charles Dickens, whose books they all loved, had honoured the Danish fairy-tale maker.

Then she told them the story, the old, dear story, of the ill-used duck that in one glorious hour found himself a swan.

"Perhaps there may be a few ugly ducks here to-night," she said, "lads and lasses that their mothers and fathers and uncles and aunts don't think much of. Don't let them be down-hearted. Who knows whether they may not grow into swans? But Skepton

isn't fairyland; so they'll have to do most of the growing for themselves—in the school, in the workshop, by their own fireside, working, learning, reading, thinking, but always growing. They must widen their wings, and stretch their necks, and whiten their plumes; and they must remember that there is always one way in which every man and woman can be great or good. They have to find out what the way is—that's all."

Then, with a gay laugh, she dropped them her lowest curtsey and left the platform.

Thunders of applauding hands failed to bring her back again, and they had to content themselves with the appearance of the rather rubicund parish doctor with his one comic song—a song that was an institution, always familiar and always dear, and affording scope for topical allusions that convulsed the audience, while every verse ended with a chorus that was loud enough to rend the roof asunder. This chorus and the clog dance were the two wild joys of the evening, and made up for some slight boredom from the genteel vocalists, who sang in French and German, and the fiddling young ladies who, with bent chins and anxious faces, demonstrated the difficulties of the modern classical school.

Claudia was passing through the crowded vestibule on her uncle's arm when a small, slim person wriggled himself out of the mass of humanity, with a curious serpentine dexterity, sliding, manœuvring, forcing his supple figure between brawny arms and obstinate elbows, till he was near enough to hold out two limp, little white-gloved hands, which Claudia showed no inclination to take.

"You were divine," he gasped, "absolutely divine! I knew of your dramatic genius. Have I not seen you act at Ballwood and at Morton Towers? But your charm, your glamour, your power to hold the masses. You took my breath away," and then in a lower voice, "pray introduce me to your uncle."

"This too flattering gentleman is Mr. Treswick, Uncle Mathew, an old acquaintance of my mother's."

"It would have been kinder to say a friend,"

murmured Treswick reproachfully, and then he explained how he was spending his Easter holidays at Harringdale, and how, going through Skepton in the afternoon with some of the house party on one of Harringdale's motors, he had seen Miss Rayner's name on a poster, and had insisted on stopping the car while he read the programme of the concert.

"After that a world to cross would not have kept me from the show," he said, "so you can't suppose I made much of thirty miles. I was determined to come, though Harringdale had a big bucolic dinner and wanted me to grin through a horse-collar for his rustic squires, and out of sheer malignity he sent me on a tin perambulator tied to a bronchitis kettle. I believe the chauffeur was in a blue funk all the way."

Claudia looked absolutely unconcerned. They were moving very slowly towards the door where the carriages and flys were taking up the gentilities, while the populace presented a mass of eager faces all gazing at Ralph Rayner's daughter.

"But it was worth the ordeal to hear your version of Hans Andersen—and to see your rapport with the people. You and the people! What a surprising conjunction! Why, I thought you were the proudest of women."

The freezing countenance with which she heard, or did not hear him, was not calculated to make him change that opinion.

Mr. Rayner's groom came panting to the door, and a pair of good grey horses drove up with the capacious omnibus that conveyed the family to church on wet Sundays.

"I hope you are not going back to Harringdale on the perambulator," Mathew said politely.

He would have liked to ask the strange man to supper, but his niece's face was a warning as unmistakable as the bit of ribbon on a hunter's tail.

"Not much! I have got a room at the King's Arms. Good-night."

He insisted on shaking hands with Claudia before he slid off through the crowd into the lamplit street,

while the Rayner family bestowed themselves in the comfortable omnibus.

"Your friend must have a poor notion of Skepton hospitality," said Mathew.

"Oh, please don't call him a friend. He was one of my mother's tame cats; and even she did not like him, though he was useful."

Pearl and Ruby, who sat opposite each other, exchanged smiles in the lamplight. These were the ethics of that smart set which they had seen denounced by their favourite novelists. What a state of society, in which one was bland and gracious to people one hated, provided only they were useful.

"I could see you didn't like the man, or I should have offered to bring him home with us," said Mathew. "What has he done to set you against him?"

"Done? Oh, nothing, except pay me the preposterous compliments he deals out to everybody. It is not for the things he has done that I loathe him, but for the thing he is."

"Strong language, my dear," said her uncle.

This time the sisters exchanged not smiles, but uplifted eyebrows. Their cousin was showing herself in the very darkest of the smart-set colours.

"One cannot help one's instincts," Claudia said carelessly, "I shouldn't speak like this to Mr. Treswick's acquaintances; but here in confidence it doesn't matter. When one comes suddenly upon a snake among the bracken, he may be a harmless one, perhaps, with no more venom than a rabbit; but he is a snake all the same, and he gives one an uncomfortable feeling."

CHAPTER XIV.

Claudia went straight from Skepton to Park Lane after the Easter holidays. She was going to live alone all through the London season in the splendid rooms where the clocks had ticked the dull refrain of a life that had burnt itself out, leaving her with the ashes of her dead, the people she had loved, her joys, her hopes, the dreams she had dreamed, all dead, all gone.

But now it seemed as if there were some living things left. Since she had become familiar with her father's world, the world of eager industrious men and women, there were living things that were a part of her own life. Her heart had gone out to her people, like the heart of a girl-queen stepping from her schoolroom to the throne. They loved her, and she gave them back their love in full measure. She had sat by their hearths and talked to the wives, and had taken the babies on her knees. She had sat in their schools and made herself understand the way they were taught, trying to find out the good and the bad of it. She had found out how they were paid, and how they lived, and had gone closely into details, to discover what things were still wanting to make their lives as perfect as the industrial life can be made. Their roughness had amused her; their intelligence had charmed her.

"I want to learn everything about them," she told her cousins, those junior partners who had charge of that vast machinery, and who were to work for her as they had worked for her father, but with the higher recompense of a vested interest.

"I don't believe it will make any difference,"

her uncle told her. "My sons' hearts have always been in their work. The only change I can foresee is their wanting to marry, now that they have an assured position."

Claudia asked if either of them was engaged.

"No. They've been too much in love with the works to think of wives—but their turn will come, I suppose. I was married before I was as old as T."

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In Park Lane Claudia took up the burden of riches. At Skepton she had tasted only the joys of gold, its splendid power over people and things; but in London she had to learn its sordid aspects, the avid, insatiable quest, the unremitting pressure of the people who wanted her money, some more, some less, but all of one accord in wanting her money, since the people who did not want it for themselves wanted it for somebody else, and were as indefatigable in the pursuit. During her father's life she had come off easily, as most of the appeals went to the fountain head; but now that she stood alone among her sacks of gold, a young woman, naturally supposed to be emotional, generous, compassionate and sympathetic, she was a fair mark for every species of beggar; and her soul sickened as she read letter after letter, every one beginning with the same hackneyed praises of her well-known benevolence, a boundless charity that was of world-wide renown.

She hardened her heart against all these. She had a girl secretary who came to her for an hour every evening, and who answered the letters of the day in a set form. There were some genuine cases, perhaps, but it was impossible to make exceptions. For every refusal to the specious appeal, larded with flattery, she sent a dole to some carefully-administered charity; or she sent the appeal to the Charity Organisation, to which she was a liberal subscriber.

Her gifts to hospitals and other well-tried institutions were upon a noble scale; but they were anonymous, and were all bestowed upon condition that her name was never to be made known to any one

connected with the charity, except the treasurer who cashed her cheque.

By persisting in this course she succeeded in establishing a reputation for meanness which was like armour proof against the assaults of those innumerable acquaintance who had axes to grind. And it was extraordinary how many of these axe-grinders there were among the people she knew, even the smart people with Mayfair houses and electric broughams. Everybody wanted something. It seemed as if all the aristocracy—even to the sacred and exclusive house of Safford—had gone into trade, and wanted to sell her bonnets or gowns, or to make her beautiful, or to do something expensive for her, or even something cheap, such as type-writing or hunting up information in the British Museum library, or finding out something about her father's pedigree. The Mayfair people who wanted nothing for themselves had always their dependents and connections pining for Miss Rayner's custom, some dear little widow whose husband had run through three fortunes and left her penniless, but with a most perfect taste in millinery; some clever managing wife and mother who had to make both ends meet by turning out the duckiest little walking-gowns for ten or fifteen guineas, absolute marvels of cheapness and chic. Or there was a genius who had taken to teaching voice-production, or chiromancy, or skating, or Bridge. The Bridge instructors were legion, and were all the most delightful creatures, whose cheery society was worth ever so much more than their paltry fee.

Claudia froze her friends by her indifference to these alluring offers. She did not want her voice produced, nor did she wish to read her friends' character or fate from the lines on their palms, least of all did she desire lessons in Bridge.

Her girl friends and their mothers and aunts left her in disgust. It was decided that she was hard and unlovable, self-centred and arrogant, handsome, but totally devoid of charm, and incredibly mean.

"What in heaven's name does she mean to do with her money?" people asked each other. "She can't

possibly spend it all on her two establishments. She talked of a yacht next year, and a voyage to the South Seas, but the expense would be a bagatelle to her. And then she is always in mourning. The house is hideously triste, and in her mother's time it was the cheeriest house in London. She has no chosen friends, no confidantes, and now that her aunt has married the local parson she is absolutely without a chaperon."

Someone suggested that she had other aunts, Lady Delabole and Lady Sedgedale, who might take her out next year.

"I don't believe she would allow herself to be taken out," replied the voice of disapproval. "She wants to be self-sufficing and to go her own way—to the South Seas——"

"Or to the devil," suggested a masculine critic. "She has her father's masterful spirit without her father's generosity."

The opinion of society expressed at luncheons and afternoon teas, at home and abroad, made Ralph Rayner's daughter a kind of monster, the eccentric growth of an inharmonious union, the blue blood of the Saffords with the thews and sinews of the parvenu manufacturer whose grandfather must have worked in a mill. No good thing could come out of such a mésalliance, said the mothers whose daughters had missed their chances of commercial millionaires, and had thrown themselves away upon younger sons of effete houses, the dregs of exhausted wealth and power.

Claudia knew nothing of this cloud of disapproval that hung heavily over her head. She was not entertaining or going into society in this year of mourning. She went occasionally to the houses of her two aunts, who were in London for the season, and she received a few of her more intimate friends, at cosy little dinners of eight or ten, to which only her own sex were invited, and she allowed them to play Bridge till the small hours, while she sat in the loggia, and watched the carriages driving through the evening grey, or gazed with dreaming eyes at the summer stars. It seemed natural that in her unchaperoned position,

and with that chilling restriction in her father's will, she should be slow to admit a man friend across her threshold. She was like a nun, who was allowed to go about the world, but who had always to remember the vow that bound her.

The only visitor of the excluded sex who contrived to force his way into her drawing-room was Sylvester Treswick, unabashed by her chilling treatment at Skepton, undeterred by the butler's disinclination to admit him.

"My mistress is not seeing visitors, sir, except a few of her intimate friends."

"Precisely, Daventry, and you know I am one of her most intimate friends—or rather of dear Lady Magdalen's, which is the same thing."

Daventry stared haughtily, not even mollified at being remembered by name. He was perfectly familiar with this slight supple figure, this exquisite neatness of hat and umbrella, gloves and tie. He remembered Mr. Treswick as one of her ladyship's innumerable flatterers and hangers-on, the men who dropped in to luncheon two or three times a week in the season, and who were always going to Cowes or Marienbad, or Homburg, or Cannes, when her ladyship was going, a troublesome ineffectual crowd who were a mark upon the choicest wines and never tipped anybody.

"They tipple, but they don't tip," was Daventry's criticism, in a moment of unbending to the under-butler.

Mr. Treswick glided past the opposing force of Daventry's fine figure, and slipped up the staircase with the ease and almost the rapidity of a lizard. It was as much as the butler could do to overtake him before he got to the drawing-room door. Claudia was in the smaller drawing-room with its wide windows opening on to the loggia. It was the prettiest and airiest room in the house, a room for spring and summer, and the furniture and draperies were all of delicate colouring and vernal freshness. She was sitting at a writing-table in front of the window, and she started up at the announcement of a visitor, and looked darkest indignation at guest and servant.

"You ought to have been told that I am not seeing people, Mr. Treswick," she said, standing straight and severe-looking in her mourning gown.

"Oh, but dearest lady, I am not people," chirped Treswick, gliding across the parquet, and clasping her unwilling hand, which he had to let go immediately, frowned upon by strong dark brows. "Daventry was positively uncivil in his endeavour to shut me out, but—*ce que Treswick veut Dieu veut.* I am not people—only a very old friend, come to you with a very serious message, almost as if I were your parish priest. You have a parish priest, I suppose. You are not utterly Darwinian."

"I have found nothing in Darwin to keep me out of my parish church."

"That's as it should be—you don't go too deep. Who knows? Even our ape-like ancestor may have been a religious person—may have felt in his dim ape-like way the necessity for something outside himself that made for righteousness."

Claudia was still standing, with her right hand moving restlessly among the loose papers on her table, open letters, pamphlets.

"Won't you sit down and be kind and cosy?" pleaded Treswick. "It won't make any difference, for I am not going away till I have delivered myself of my message. I don't mind standing, but it looks rather uncomfortable for a confidential talk."

Claudia returned to her seat, and pushed away her papers with unconcealed impatience. She was not going to be civil to this man; indeed she wanted to make his visit as unpleasant to him as it was to herself. But she did not reckon with that hardness of shell for which this particular zoological specimen was celebrated.

"Pray what may your message be, and who may have sent you with it?" she asked, with a grave unyielding countenance, looking far away over the tops of the trees and not at the man she was addressing.

"My message is from all the world, or from that delightful section of society that is all our world," said Treswick, "but if you insist upon looking at

Bayswater while I am talking to you we are not likely to get *en rapport*."

"I don't think there is much chance of our getting *en rapport* in any case. I have had very little *rapport* with society this year, and I doubt if I shall have much more next year. What you call the world is a very little bit of the earth's surface, and I am tired of it. Next year I hope to be thousands of miles away."

"That is so like you—and so unlike your adorable mother."

She shivered at his mention of her mother, the caressing tone, the familiarity as of a cherished friend, when she knew the exact measure of her mother's regard for him—a useful little person, who could sing a little, and had ideas about gowns and hats, and knew all the best shops in Paris, and liked to execute commissions in the Rue de la Paix.

"My mother was fond of society; and she did not enjoy anything adventurous. I am not like her. I hate conventionalities, and hacknied pleasures; and I want to see bigger places than Cannes and Marienbad, bigger even than Tyrol and the Italian lakes."

"More picturesque than Skepton——" said Treswick.

"Skepton is the biggest place in the world for me. It is a poor thing, but mine own."

"I could not have believed that you would ever feel interested in a town of workshops and furnaces—even as the source of your wealth."

She had been looking at Bayswater until this moment, but she turned upon him suddenly with an indignant flash in her splendid eyes.

"It is not as the source of my wealth that Skepton interests me," she said. "It is a world in itself, a world of earnest, honest, industrious people, whose lives seem worthier than any of the lives I have known in society. No, I will not say any—there are stars that shine, great minds, great hearts, noble lives. But those Skepton workers are worthier than the idlers here—the ruck—whose highest exercise of brain power is to make a good book for the racing season, or to do a gamble on the Stock Exchange."

She checked herself suddenly, having been betrayed out of her stony reserve by that sudden flame of anger.

"You are right," he said. "Nothing is more worthless than modern life in its idlest form. But most of us are doing something, most of us are playing at Philanthropy. We have our half-hours in the slums; we pay visits of inspection to the hospitals; we run about with buns and tea-cups at school-children's teas. We are not so bad as we seem."

Claudia resumed her contemplation of the landscape towards Hyde Park Gardens. She was not going to help him to spin out his visit.

Suddenly he changed his tone, brought his chair a little nearer hers—those strongly marked brows warning him not to bring it too near—and dropped his light voice to a graver depth.

"I have come to talk to you very seriously of your position in the world."

"Pray do nothing of the kind, Mr. Treswick. I require nobody's advice—or criticism."

"Oh, yes you do! 'What is amiss?' you ask, like the man in the play. You are, and do not know it. You do not know the responsibilities of wealth. You do not know how empty the world is to the man or woman who, having wealth, does nothing great or good with it."

"I have plenty of scope for doing good work—if not great work—without any suggestion from you."

"You mean Skepton? But Skepton is a going concern. It is no work of yours. There is nothing left for you to do there. Your father made Skepton. To put a finger to the machine would be to spoil it. I spent a long morning there walking about the town and environs, and hearing things. Skepton is absolutely wonderful. Your father was great—colossal—in his proper sphere. But *you* have to do something—of your own initiative—to leave the world better and wiser than you found it. You have to show people what there is in you—and to stop the malignant wretches who go about saying that Miss Rayner is eccentric, and miserly."

"I do not mind being thought a miser or eccentric."

"Ah, but believe me, there is danger in the latter reputation—for the holder of a great fortune. Casual acquaintance begin by talking of eccentricity; and near relations end by calling in brain-doctors."

Claudia sprang up in a fury.

"You are the most insolent person who ever came into this house," she said, going hurriedly towards the nearest bell.

Treswick ran to intercept her. He put his slight sinuous form between her and the ivory knob towards which her hand was extended. He caught her hand in his, and clasped and kissed it reverently, before she could snatch it away.

"I will not listen to another word."

"Dear lady, I am going to put before you such a dazzling picture that your curses will change to blessings. I have a great project to offer you—a scheme that would win you lasting fame—and that would bring society to your feet."

Claudia threw herself into a chair, with a long sigh of weariness.

"Now you are coming to the point," she said. "I knew you must be an axe-grinder, though your opening is not the usual formula. Pray what is your axe?"

"There is only one important thing, one really significant thing that wealth can do nowadays. It can establish a newspaper. Journalism rules the world. Successful journalists rub shoulders with peers who won their spurs in the first crusade. They have to walk behind the crusaders; but they are in the same line, and they wear the same coronets, and they can bully the crusaders in print, if they think themselves snubbed. The fourth estate is really the first estate. It can make prime ministers—and it can unmake laws."

"And you suggest that I should establish a newspaper—like——"

"Like no newspaper that is or ever has been. Such a paper as can only be run by a proprietor who does not care about financial results. The common or

garden newspaper-proprietor is a man of business, and his first consideration is the thing that will pay. He studies the mind of the mob, and levels down to them. He never considers what they ought to like. He only thinks of what they do like ; and so the standard gets lower instead of higher. Your paper would be on a different plane. There would be no forty per cent. on capital, perhaps no five per cent., possibly nothing. But it would be like the blast of trumpets that blew down the walls of Jericho. It would be a daily assault against the citadels of the vulgar. It would be the daily gospel of refinement—the daily call to the life beautiful. That ought to be your title—'The Life Beautiful.'"

And then Sylvester Treswick, warming with his subject, expatiated upon the charm of such a journal. It would leave out everything horrible, everything sordid. It would record no crimes of violence, no harrowing coroners' inquests ; no scandal of the Divorce Court, no suicide's farewell letters, no hideous accidents, no stories of vice and famine and disease. With politics it would deal largely, boldly, brilliantly. Literature and art would be treated by adepts of assured power. It would coruscate with wit ; it would be steeped in the humours of life ; but everything would be touched with refinement. The girl of sixteen might pore over its pages. The woman of society, the man of the world, the intellectual sybarite disgusted with the foulness of the age, sickened with the literature of lust, would take up "The Life Beautiful" in the precious hour of rest, certain to find nothing loathsome between the leaves.

"And you think that if such a daily paper ought to be I ought to finance the enterprise ?" asked Claudia, looking at him with a freezing directness, as if she were weighing him in an invisible balance.

"I think it is one of the great things—perhaps the greatest thing—you could do, and the thing that would bring you honour and influence, and lift you out of the ruck of rich women."

"I am quite content to remain in the ruck. There is comfort in being insignificant."

"*That* your fortune will not allow you to be."

"Well, Mr. Treswick, your axe is a very handsome axe, and no doubt it is worth grinding—but it is not in my line. And now I hope you'll let me go for my morning walk. My dogs are in the Park, and I have promised to meet them."

"You will at least think of my scheme?"

"I have thought of it already. It is a very attractive scheme—but, as I said just now—not in my line."

"Remember—though I have talked of the possibility of loss—it is on the cards that there might be money in it—a great fortune. The newspapers that succeed are gold-mines. This would be a new departure in daily papers, reactionary—a dear paper, meant for people who have been sickened by cheap papers. It would be perfect morally and physically—pleasant to the touch—agreeable to the mind."

"And you—what would be your position?"

"Business-manager. I have the whole machinery at my fingers' ends."

"With that knowledge it will be easy for you to find the mere capitalist."

This time he allowed her to press the ivory knob that meant dismissal.

"I am not altogether disheartened," he said, with his gayest air. "You will brood upon my ideas—and when you take up a daily paper you will think—as your eye runs up and down the page, 'How different *my* paper would be!' The scheme will grow upon you. It has life in it. So long."

She could not refuse to take the limp little hand that fluttered into hers; but she gave a great sigh of relief when he was gone, and she rang her bell a second time.

"I am never at home to Mr. Treswick, please remember, Daventry."

"I told the gentleman as much, ma'am, but he insisted on coming upstairs. He wouldn't even wait to be shown up, but ran up in front of me."

* * * * * *

People gave themselves a good deal of mental

occupation in wondering how Claudia Rayner could bear to live alone in the White House, seeing very few people, all through the summer; but Claudia was less an object of pity than her friends imagined. She had wearied of the mill-round of pleasures before her mother's sad illness brought their frivolous life to a sudden stop, and she had no longing to renew the old experiences. She had her interests at Skepton, and she had the pleasures of solitude in Park Lane. She read inordinately—science, history, travel, all the great books. Her carriage might have been seen waiting for her at the door of the London Library two or three times a week, while she took counsel with an adviser within. Her reading opened new worlds, and never brought satiety, and for relaxation she had the innumerable fine concerts of a London season, and the picture-galleries, where her appearance on the morning of a private view was generally recorded, though she went as early as possible, in order to see the pictures and to escape notice.

Then she had her letters from Skepton, letters from her junior partners, Theodore and Algernon, who wrote to her every week, and kept her in touch with her people.

"I hope you are coming to our Brass Band Contest, in July," T. wrote in his last letter. "After football and cricket it is the greatest event of the year. The mother is keeping the best room—your room, she calls it—and she counts on having you."

Claudia felt that "the mother" would have to be disappointed. If she went to Skepton again it must be to her rooms in the works, the rooms that her cousins spoke of as her "bachelor diggings." To those diggings and not to Vale Hall she must go. They had all been kind to her, but with the exception of her uncle, whose kindness was restrained and never boring, they had been oppressively kind. They had persecuted her with futile attentions; they had hardly allowed her to be alone for a quarter of an hour through the livelong day. They had been tormented with the idea that she must be dull. They had thrust new novels upon her, hot from the circulating library,

and had not allowed her to read a single page. They had stoked her fire, against her will, till they made her room a furnace. They had claimed the cousinly right to come to her bedroom at night and sit there while Mary brushed her hair, and to look at all her clothes, and expatiate upon their Parisian superiority.

And then there had been their everlasting confidences, Ruby's in particular, who was never tired of talking about her *fiancé*, and what she was going to do when she was married, especially how she meant to get away from the Philistinism of Vale Hall, and have everything "up-to-date."

"Of course I know we are too Early Victorian for words," she told Claudia, "and I'm afraid it must get upon your nerves."

"I don't think one's furniture can make much difference," Claudia answered politely, "and your house is extremely comfortable."

"Oh, but it isn't only the house. It's our ideas, our meals, our servants, everything. We are ages behind the times. We girls know it; but the Pater and Mater are absolutely unconscious of their stagnation. You'll see the difference when we have establishments of our own," concluded Ruby, fortified by the knowledge that she was now sure of ten thousand pounds that she could spend as she liked, or at least some portion of it. Her father had already mooted the question of how her legacy could be tied up in her marriage-settlement, a question that it seemed almost indelicate to discuss, when it was considered that dear Harold had nothing to settle.

"Pray tell me what a Brass Band Contest means," she wrote to Theodore. "I am utterly in the dark, and please tell my aunt, with my love, that if I go to Skepton this summer it will be only for a day or two, and I shall put up in my rooms at the works with Mary and a footman. It will be only a flying visit."

The nature of the contest was duly explained to her. It was to take place in the People's Park, where there was a pavilion spacious enough for an orchestra of fifty performers. Each of the Rayner works had its own brass band, and these bands were to compete

for the Rayner Prize, and they were also to compete with brass bands from other towns, wool or iron; in short, all the "brass" talent in Yorkshire was likely to be heard in the course of the contest, which would occupy two long days, from noon till evening.

It would be a general holiday, and a time of great rejoicing, and Claudia was assured that, with her love of music, she would be at once surprised and delighted at the excellence of the bands.

There was disappointment, genuine disappointment on the part of her uncle and aunt, when she insisted on stopping in her father's old rooms, while there was some slight huffiness on the part of the three girls.

"We are too Early Victorian," Ruby said haughtily, for though she sometimes chose to disparage her domestic surroundings as a sign of personal superiority, she was very angry when any one else seemed contemptuous; and this conduct of Claudia's was a disparaging of Vale Hall.

"I suppose you prefer the dinners they send you from the hotel to our old cook's menu," she said, when she and Claudia were sitting side by side in the half-crown places at the contest.

"My dear Ruby, your dinners at Vale Hall are only too good. I have ordered a chop and some tea at eight, and I think it's very likely that Mary will cook the chop."

"Tea with meat is simply poison," said Algernon. "You had much better come home with us. I'll motor you back to Skepton."

One of the consequences of his uncle's will had been the establishment of a Mercédes car in a building that had been an infirmary for his father's hunters, in the days when the stud was larger. The infirmary could be easily spared. Mathew did not ride to hounds so often as of old, and his family regarded carriage-horses as a vanishing quantity.

"The fact is, horses are pretty well played out," Algernon opined.

This was a strange utterance to be heard in a county

where the worship of the horse was once almost a religion.

July was at fever point, just that burning core in the heart of summer when English people know what it is to feel really warm, and the contest was an ordeal by fire even for the audience, while the performers melted as they blew. Shade was impossible on the benches in front of the orchestra, and the audience presented a dazzling array of smart sunshades, where spots of crimson and rose sparkled amid the prevailing white. It was a day for all that Skepton possessed of the smartest in frocks and parasols, and even Claudia had laid aside her lustreless black in honour of the occasion, and had put on a plain white cashmere gown with a broad black sash and a black gauze hat that looked as if it were made of a dark cloud, with starry gleams here and there among the fluffiness.

From what she had been told of the performance she was prepared to hear "Annie Laurie" played consecutively by fourteen bands, played loud enough, she thought, to bring a warrior host across the Scottish border, moved to wild deeds of derring do by that aggressive music; but she was not prepared, after the fourteenth performance, to be asked to step on to the platform and deliver a prize bâton of ebony and silver to the conductor of the winning band. She made no objection to do anything that could please her own people, and she stood in the front of the orchestra without distress or embarrassment to hear the welkin ring with applauding hands and stentorian cheering, as she delivered the bâton to the kneeling conductor.

"She looks handsomer in white gown than she did in black," said one of her admirers.

"Nought o' sort, lad, she looks a deal better in a waist that shows her arms and showlders. My word, she's as fine as statoo o' Juno I saw at British Museum in Lunnon," argued another, who had travelled.

They were all ready to worship her. They would have liked her had she been squat and snub-nosed, freckled and "cross-eyed," just because she was

Ralph Rayner's lass, and belonged to them. She would have had to behave very badly to set them against her. She came of the good old race, working men a century ago in the dimness of old days before the Reform Bill, masters for the last eighty years, and always good masters. Whatever she had been they would have given her allegiance, and would have thought kindly of her. But her beauty, and something grand and frank in her bearing and manner—self-possessed, proud, yet friendly and familiar—had magnetised them.

"They used to call Gladstone a magnetic man," one of them said. "I call Ralph Rayner's lass a magnetic woman."

"That's just what she is, mate, and you'd ha' to go a long way to match her."

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Claudia had much talk with her uncle and his sons at the works during this visit. She did not forget that the young men were her partners, and that their father had been second only to her own father during the great expansion of the trade after her grandfather had, in Algernon's phrase, "taken a back seat." He had not actually retired from business, but he had given his elder son a free hand.

From these junior partners of hers, and from her uncle the general manager, Claudia learnt a great deal about the working of this mighty machine, the various workshops producing different things, but all of an allied nature, and all working together for progress. In Skepton there had been no standing still. New ideas were continually being embodied in iron; time-saving inventions, trouble-saving inventions, cost-reducing inventions. In almost every monster of the deep that was built on the Clyde there was some improvement in detail that came from Skepton. Wherever living brain-power could be brought to bear upon dead matter, Ralph Rayner had been a conqueror. Year by year the things he made and the machinery that had made the things had developed, and changed, and improved; and still the ideal, the absolute, the perfect, was not realised, and the ingenious brain went

on labouring, unsatisfied and unresting. The two young men had grown up in the sphere of their uncle's influence. They knew how he had worked, and what he had wanted. His strenuous character had set its mark upon them. At home, and judged by the Park Lane standard, they were commonplace young men, Philistines of the Philistines; but in the workshops they were men of enlightened ideas, in the forefront of enterprise and improvement, with sympathy and understanding for those human instruments upon whose labour their fortunes had been built.

Claudia felt that she could trust them, and their ardour for the ideal was stimulated by her quick understanding and warm appreciation of their efforts.

She stayed in Skepton longer than she had intended, and she went about among her people. She sat in their little gardens in the warm evenings, talking to them, and finding out the heart of their mystery, learning to understand life as they understood it, realising their world and its simple griefs, a world so unlike her own in its outward aspect, in house and furniture and clothes and food, and yet so like in its main factors of sickness and death, love and hate, heart-ache and sin, unfaithful husbands and false wives, prodigal sons and fallen daughters; all the great things that matter. She came very near to them in sympathy as her knowledge grew. She spent hours in the two hospitals, for adults and for children, two that had begun under one roof and had been divided as their needs increased, when Ralph Rayner bought the handsome villa residence of a manufacturer who had built his dwelling house within half a mile of his "works." Works as well as villa had become Ralph Rayner's property, when the former owner retired from a decaying business. Of the villa there had been made the children's hospital, an ideal hospital that was always remembered with affection by the suffering children who had gone there for healing.

Claudia sat by the little white beds, and walked in the gardens with the convalescents; and then she went to another smaller and sadder hospital, an old Tudor farm-house, six miles from Skepton, in the

heart of a pastoral valley, the hospital for incurables, many of them the hapless victims of accidents that might have been prevented by care on their own part, and were never due to the neglect or indifference of their employer. It was a blessed revelation to find that even these were not all unhappy, and that curious gifts of mind and hand had been developed on those "mattress graves" of the bedridden; exquisite needlework done by masculine fingers, delicate pencil-drawing, painting, modelling, by men and women to whom all art was unknown till fate laid them low, music, poetry, and above all a sublime patience, the patience of those whose destiny is fixed.

Perfection here seemed absolute. The position of the house in a fertile valley, sheltered from cold winds, the thick walls and deep embrasures of the windows, that made the house cool in summer and warm in winter, the old-world garden with its wide herbaceous borders, and expanse of lawn, and arches and colonnades of roses, a plethora of roses in this season of high summer, roses covering the house, and looking in at every window.

"We have all the sweet-smelling flowers," the matron told Claudia. "Mr. Rayner made a point of that, and every patient has a bunch of flowers by the bedside, summer and winter. Mr. Mathew Rayner sends us a supply from his hot-houses when we have not enough here; but we have our own greenhouses, and make a great show with our tulips and hyacinths."

"My father seems to have thought of everything."

"Ah, Miss Rayner, there's no one knows the thought he gave and the trouble he took about this place, except those that worked with him. But that was his way in everything. He couldn't satisfy himself short of perfection."

Claudia remembered the concerts and great gatherings in Park Lane and at Daneborough, and the infinite trouble her father had taken about insignificant details. She had been inclined to look down upon him for his interest in trivial things; but now, seeing the work he had done for the people who depended

upon him, she began to think there was something fine in the quality of a mind that always strove for the highest.

She dined at Vale Hall on two evenings, once when there was something in the way of a dinner party, the vicar and his wife, the family doctor and his wife and wife's brother, and the chief clerk and cashier at one of the works, who had the gift of music and could accompany Pearl in her most ambitious flights; and once when the family were alone, and when she was honoured with the confidences of the three girls and was told all about the furnished house that had been taken at Scarborough in just the most fashionable spot upon the cliff, where Harold was to join them at the beginning of the vacation. He had had three briefs since Christmas; and there was a feeling that his professional prospects were looking up.

These two dinners reconciled the family to Claudia's residence in her Skepton rooms.

"Of course she must do something eccentric, poor dear girl," Ruby said when she was gone. "It's a mercy that it's nothing worse than bachelor diggings."

CHAPTER XV.

August was a week old, and London was deserted, while Claudia still lingered in Park Lane, and walked in the Park with her dogs, that Park where only a solitary landau or an unsmart victoria from the suburbs was to be seen in the drive that had been blocked with smartness and beauty only a month ago. She meant to leave London, and, indeed, yearned for wider horizons than Chelsea and Bayswater, to see the crimson dappled dawn above the great Italian lake, as she had seen it once after a sleepless night, a blood-red firmament, a dawn of beauty and menace, that marked the end of exquisite weather and the coming of rain and dulness. All the strange and lovely places on the earth were open to her with whom, as her servants expressed the fact, "money was no object." Buda-Pesth, Roumania, Carinthia, Sicily, Athens—all were open to a young woman who could afford to pay courier and guide, post-carriages or motors, inn-keepers, and all the train of cadgers and hangers-on upon the heels of wealth. Perhaps it was the knowledge of her perfect freedom of choice that made her unable to choose. She had no one to consult, no one to be vexed or offended by her course of action.

Lady Louisa had urged her to spend the autumn months at Daneborough. Where could she be better off than in her own house? When winter came she might naturally prefer the south of France, and, indeed, Lady Louisa herself had been thinking of a month or six weeks on the Riviera at some sweet place where Wilfred might get a chaplaincy. It would be quite easy

to get a good man for his parish work. He had Oxford pals who would jump at the chance. Lady Louisa was strenuous in her entreaty that Claudia would take up the duties of her position, and do the entertaining that would be expected of her, the flower-show, which had always been held in Daneborough Park, the school-children's tea, and the mothers' tea, the various leagues that had to be fêted at least once a year. Her mourning, which was now ancient history, could not excuse her from such obvious duties.

Claudia shrugged her shoulders, threw her aunt's letter into the waste-paper basket, and wrote briefly, but kindly in reply.

"The parties shall be given, my dear aunt, but you and the vicar must give them. I will send plenty of servants, and Vickers to look after them, and you can work your will in the house and grounds. Everything shall be done that you choose to order; and who so proper as the vicar and his wife to receive the parish people? I should be of no use in such entertainments."

After this Lady Louisa ceased from troubling.

"Words cannot paint the happiness my marriage has brought me," she told her niece in a letter of five sheets, three or four words in a line, "a happiness greatly enhanced by your generosity, my kindest Claudia. Wilfred is more than devoted. If you could see him trotting into the garden after me with my goloshes, for fear I should catch cold by walking on dewy grass, or if you could hear the interest he takes in my clothes, always wanting to know which hat or bonnet I am going to wear at the Sunday service—I am sorry to say he prefers me in a bonnet—you would know what a perfect husband is. I wish you were free to choose such another. But you, who have to surrender a fortune on your marriage, can only marry a rich man. It is so delightful to know that our union has improved my poor dear's social position. He was always popular in Daneborough, where there was not a house in which he was not welcome; but there were people within twenty miles

who ignored his existence, and who have rallied round us since our marriage, much to his delight. 'Another fortress down!' he says in his playful way, after some of the great people have called. We have visitors of my own world from forty and even fifty miles, and I have to insist that he should wear nice clothes *always*, and not consider an old alpaca coat good enough for the house, since with these tearing motors we are continually being surprised by visitors—and the faster the motor the more important the people. My dear Wilfred has risen to the occasion, and any little touch of middle-class in his ideas and manners which may have jarred upon us in the past has disappeared under my influence."

Claudia smiled as she read the letter. It seemed to her that her aunt had provided herself with a dutiful and affectionate son, without the trouble of bringing him into the world.

It was good that one of her family should be quite happy, and that one the Cinderella, the failure among the beauty daughters of the house of Safford.

Having despatched the larger half of the establishment to Daneborough, and declared her intention of not going there till the following spring, Claudia had to make up her mind as to what delectable spot on the earth's crust she should betake herself, being so free to choose. London was daily becoming more and more impossible from the society point of view, though she herself had no objection to an empty park and streets of shuttered windows.

"I am as irresolute as Hamlet," she thought, after going over three or four continental railway guides, "I want to go to all the places—but I don't want to go to any one of them quite enough to make a start. *Vis inertia* is the only strength I know."

She decided on Buda-Pesth as one point in a long tour. She did not want to go back to any of the places where she had been with her mother. Those were, happily, few—for Lady Magdalen cared only to go where her own little world went, and her world was repetitive in its ways, and narrow in its range.

Spain, Austria, all Central Europe would be new

ground. Claudia sent for a courier who had travelled with her marchioness aunt, and who was described as a paragon.

"He is expensive—utterly without an idea of economy," Lady Delabole told her, "but, of course, *you* need not mind that. He brought us to the brink of bankruptcy in our Spanish tour, but we all adored him: so cultured; seven languages; and such manners!"

"What is his own nationality?"

"His native country is the world. I believe he has forgotten where he was born or what language he spoke first. If you engage him, you will have no more trouble between London and the Pyramids than if you were sitting in your loggia. Every mortal thing you want will be brought to you without your asking for it. Everything you want to know will be told you without a question. You will find yourself expected and prepared for in the most out-of-the-way places—every hotel will seem like your own home—not a whim of yours will have been forgotten, and, what is more, your maids will not be able to find anything to grumble about. You had better take two if you are going far afield, as one of them is sure to be ill, or to be cabled for to somebody's death-bed. *That* is almost inevitable. It happened to me in Egypt and in Sicily, within three years."

"I shall take old Mary for company, and Félicité to look after my clothes."

"That is the least you can do if you insist upon travelling alone. Rather absurd of you, by the way, when I am willing to take you to Marienbad, which is to be gayer than ever this year."

"Marienbad would be full of sad thoughts."

"But, my dear child, you must harden your mind. No doubt you would feel it at first, after being there with poor Magda. But it is ridiculous to taboo a place to which the doctors might send you to-morrow."

"The doctors would have to find me another place."

"You are so exceptionally robust—your father's magnificent constitution. I daresay Marienbad will

be given over to the wolves and owls before you are rheumatic enough to be ordered there."

The peerless courier, Signor Delfino, called upon Claudia next day, and was duly engaged by her.

"I don't quite know when I shall start," she told him, "but your salary will begin at once."

She had not asked him the amount.

"I conclude by your name that you are Italian," she said.

"If madame is going to Italy I am Italian—but for Central Europe I am a Greek. The Greeks are respected in those countries. I had an uncle born at Athens."

* * * * * *

Everybody was gone, and yet Claudia lingered. Again she compared herself to Hamlet, who, with such incentive to action had remained inactive, save in one spurt of blind fury. All those great thoughts, all those fiery resolves, and only poor old Polonius despatched behind the arras by a blunder. Claudia lingered as Hamlet had lingered, while the town grew hotter and emptier every day.

She thought of herself and of her destiny in idle half hours, sitting in the loggia with Rag on her lap. In these dreaming hours she was too languid to keep canine affection at a proper distance. Rag *would* come, and after he had jumped upon her lap six or seven times it seemed hopeless to put him down again; so he stopped, and she was weak enough to press absent-minded kisses on his smooth, well-bred head, and the drooping ears that were softer than satin.

Was it not a curious fate that she brooded over in the oppressive August afternoon? So much of wealth, so much of power, and no one in the world she cared for, save, indeed, that mass of humanity at Skepton, the multitude instead of one, for which she cared greatly, proud of their liking, proud of her power to make them happy.

Marriage was forbidden—unless at the forfeiture of all she valued in the world. Her kingdom! No, she was not going to surrender her kingdom. Was there upon this earth the man worthy of so tremendous

a sacrifice? She had never seen such a man in the days when she was free to choose. Frankland was the best; the only one among all her admirers whom she had ever liked or esteemed, and her heart had never beat faster by a fraction for Lord Frankland. Liking had never touched the verge of love.

She meditated with a cynical smile upon the institution of marriage, as it had come within her own knowledge. What real union of heart and mind had there been between her father and mother? Lady Magdalen had never told her as much in express words, but affection had made her quick to read her mother's thoughts, and she knew that though the husband had loved intensely, the marriage had been one of convenience on the wife's part, one of the good matches of her season, to have refused which would have been abject folly. That had been Lord Altrincham's phrase, repeated at every appearance of hesitation on his daughter's part, while the engagement was pending.

Sometimes in her long and wearing illness Lady Magdalen had spoken of her husband with a touch of remorse.

"I'm afraid I've never been good enough to your father, not grateful enough," she would say, musing over the vanished past, the things that had been done and the things that had been left undone. "He has been so indulgent, so extraordinarily indulgent to my whims and fancies; and now, as I look back, I can see that I used to take things rather too easily, almost as a matter of course, as if he was only there to do what I wanted."

"He has been proud of you, mother, and very happy with you."

"I know he has been proud, and I should like to think that he has been happy. But I'm afraid I wore out his love by my selfishness and my triviality. I mean to say all sorts of sweet things to him when he comes next week. I begin to realise the preciousness of his love, now that I am a wreck, and he can only pity me."

* * * * * *

Claudia considered all the marriages she had seen among her girl friends; the solemn confidences of the newly-engaged girl in which the lover appeared as a demi-god; the confidences of the young wife a year or two after, when the boringness and unkindness, the stinginess and pig-headedness, of the husband furnished inexhaustible subjects for discourse. She thought of the girls who had married for rank, not ashamed of what they considered a laudable ambition; the girls who had married obviously for money, though pretending indifference to their marriage settlement, girls for whom a husband had been only a man who signed cheques. She thought of that feather-headed section who had married for the sake of a trousseau, and three or four hundred wedding presents, for éclat, for excitement, to escape from the monotony of home, a home where people were not unkind, but only boring. Many of the marriages she remembered had been only an escape from the known to the unknown.

And what of the aftermath of such unions? What of the married lives she had known? What of the open secrets, the notoriously false wives, and the complacent husbands, wilfully blind to their dishonour. Or, when the husband and wife were of stronger stuff, what of the volcano of jealousy and outraged love, hidden under the smooth mask of conventionality? What of the quarrels, the divorces, the selfishness of husbands, the insatiable extravagance of wives? What had she seen in her five years of society to make her in love with wedlock, or to make it seem a hard thing to go to the end of life's journey without the help of a strong man's love? Did the man live whose devotion could compensate for the loss of her liberty—without counting that other loss—of her kingdom?

She had freedom, and she had power, that illimitable power of wealth, the modern enchanter's wand. She could do what she liked, go where she liked. She gloried in the thought of her freedom, and she sat in the loggia in the sultry atmosphere, among the scented lilies, inert and languid, dreaming over a guide-book.

Her servants were preparing for a continental tour, not caring much where they went, since they had seen the wonderful courier who was to make all travel smooth and easy. Félicité was charmed with the courier, who had contrived to make her acquaintance when calling to enquire about the date of departure, so curiously deferred. To travel with Signor Delfino would be a privilege, and to escape a long, dull autumn in that triste château in Derbyshire would be a blessing. She yearned for the blue skies and the tideless sea lapping the beach at Monaco, or dancing about the rocky ledges of Porto Fino.

Old Mary regarded foreign travel as a necessary evil; but she infinitely preferred her large, airy bedroom at Daneborough, and the housekeeper's pleasant parlour, with long windows opening on a Dutch garden, to the finest hotel between Calais and Rome. Daneborough was Mary's ideal mansion, superior to Lord Altrincham's great white barrack, albeit on a less colossal scale.

Mary's position in London was something of a sinecure, Félicité taking sole charge of her mistress's wardrobe, and waiting on her till she was dressed for dinner. It was only rather late at night that the elder woman came upon the scene, when Claudia liked to have her hair brushed by the hands that had performed that office in her nursery and school-room stage. Old Mary had a special gift of hair-brushing, or, at least, was allowed to think so, while in sober truth, this evening toilet afforded the only chance of friendly association between mistress and maid, and Claudia did not want to lose touch with the trusted servant who had been her mother's constant attendant from the beginning of her illness to the hour of her death. Trained nurses might come and go, changed at a caprice of patient or doctor; but Mary had been always there—in a room near her mistress—lying awake with open door through the long sad night, to listen for any sound from the sick room, and to be sure that the nurses did their duty.

It was on one of those sultry August nights in Park Lane, when the upper half of her dressing-room

windows were open to the blue darkness of a sky alive with stars, that Claudia first heard the name of a man who had a certain renown among church-going people, but whose fame had not yet become widely known in the West-end. Duchesses had not been told about him; archbishops had not noticed him. He had spent nearly a third of his pastoral life in Africa, and he had come back to England two years ago to work in regions less pleasing than the Shiré Mountains or the level shores of Lake Nyassa, and among people worse off and less amenable than negro or negroid.

"Why, Mary, what's the matter with you to-night?" exclaimed Claudia, startled by a jerk of the brush, accompanied by a suppressed sob from the brusher. "Why, you have been crying, crying quietly ever so long, while you brushed my hair! What is it? Bad news from home?

Mary's home was a place often spoken of, but rarely visited. Once in two years Mary took a return ticket to a small town in the north of England, with a name that suggested Africa rather than Great Britain, and spent two or three days with her people, returning laden with rustic produce that nobody in Mr. Rayner's pampered household would look at, much less taste, and which ultimately had to be given to the odd-man for his old mother, who, it appeared, had dim yearnings for food remembered in a rural childhood, and was a grateful recipient of wortle-berry pasties and hog-puddings.

"No," gasped Mary, stifling a sob. "It's nothing about me or mine, miss. It's only a sermon I heard this evening."

"A sermon! Why, you foolish old Mary! What kind of a sermon could it be to make you cry at this time of night? A funeral sermon, I suppose?"

"No, miss, not unless it was the funeral of the human species, or at least such of them as live out Deptford way, beyond the Old Kent Road. Poor things! They had better be dead than living the lives they do."

"Oh, you have been to hear your famous slum

preacher that you were telling me about the other day."

"Yes, Miss Claudia. You see, my old cousin—or I ought to say my cousin's widow, for she's no blood relation—Mrs. Margetts, lives out New Cross way, and in quite a nice little street of semi-detaches, nothing of the slum about her place. She is a serious-minded woman, being without chick or child, and having nothing else to think of, and she's one that'll go any distance after a fine preacher, and certainly there never was a finer preacher than this Mr. Murray that's holding mission-services at St. Bartholomew's. You think a lot of your fashionable preachers in Mayfair, but, lor' miss, you'd think the best of them poor creatures after you'd sat under Mr. Murray. I only wish you'd go and hear him, before you go abroad."

"Before I go abroad? When am I going, Mary? I'm sure I don't know."

"No, miss, but the sooner you go the better; for the fact is you're a bit run down. You ought to have gone to Whitby when you left Skepton, instead of coming back to London."

And then Mary expatiated upon the wonderful work of the mission, the great bare church crowded with shabby people, all interested and absorbed in the words of the preacher, hanging upon his speech, so that a sermon of nearly an hour seemed too brief.

"It wasn't like preaching to them," Mary said. "It was more like a kind friend talking to them, reasoning with them, making himself one of them. He knows what poor people suffer and what they feel, and what they think, and where they go wrong. He doesn't talk to them from miles away as your Mayfair preachers do mostly, mighty kind, but so superior. He puts himself on a level with them. And some of them were the lowest of the low. Many were respectable, but oh! so shabby. There wasn't a bonnet in that crowded church that I would have put on my head."

"I must go to hear him, Mary. It will be a sensation. When will he preach again?"

"Every evening, Miss Claudia. It's a mission, you see, a month of mission-services, and it's more than half over. He preaches every evening. The service doesn't begin till half-past seven, so as to give people time to be there after their work. He preaches to them at night; and he goes about among them all day, into their wretched houses to see the women and children, such as are not out at work, and into the factories and eating-houses, to catch the workers in their dinner-time, and get acquainted with them."

"Do they like that? Don't they consider him rather officious and interfering?"

"They worship the ground he walks upon, Miss Claudia—leastways, there are some bad lots that have thrown things at him, and one young hurlingam hit him on the forehead with a stone, but he took no more account of it than if it had been a rose-bud—no more than Mr. Chambelling did when he was thrown out of his cab."

"You seem to have heard a great deal about him."

"It's what my cousin told me, miss. She's regular cracked about him, goes to all his services, and has got his photo on her chimney-piece! She made me stop outside the church till he came out, and we saw the crowd waiting for him, and they pressed round him as he walked through them. Well, it put me in mind of the Gospel, miss. The lame, the halt, and the blind! They were all there."

"I believe these mission-services are very common in the slums," said Claudia.

"That they may well be, miss, for God knows they're wanted; but a preacher like this one ain't common. One of the newspapers said there hadn't been such a preacher since George Whitefield. Perhaps you've heard Mr. Whitefield."

Claudia told Mary that the orator in question had passed the dark river more than a century ago, and also told her something of his character and career; the preaching on Kennington Common in the summer darkness, the gaping crowd hushed into silence by the grand voice.

"Good-night, Mary," she said, as she dismissed

her favourite. "I shall certainly go and hear this new Whitefield."

Mary thought she would forget all about it next day, but at half-past six o'clock the brougham was at the door, and Mary was summoned to instruct her mistress as to the exact whereabouts of the church between New Cross and Deptford.

The church was St. Bartholomew's, Beresford Street, a turning out of Grandison Road, New Cross.

Mary looked wistfully at her mistress, wondering a little at not being invited to accompany her. It would not be the first time. Claudia had often taken her old friend of the nursery and school-room for some little treat; but this evening there was no such idea in Claudia's mind. If there was anything like emotion, any mental shock, to be got out of the mission preacher's eloquence, she wanted to be alone with her thoughts and feelings. She had been falling too much into Hamlet's way of thinking since her mother's death, and had it not been for those new interests she had found at Skepton she, too, would have called the world she lived in "weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable."

The drive in the golden evening light, through the dust and grime of a great city that had been burnt up by the sunshine of a dry August, seemed interminable. It was almost Claudia's first experience of the vastness of the place she lived in. Her London was bounded on the north by the bettermost terraces and squares of Bayswater, and on the south by the fine houses on the Chelsea Embankment. This other London, this teeming metropolis of crowded life and the fierce competition of labour—mostly unskilled and nomadic—was an unknown city. The tawdry shops, the gorgeous taverns, the shabby houses, mean streets revealing their dreary perspective at every break in the broad busy road—omnibus and tram, waggon and cart, never a carriage, no sign or token of any life but the life of poverty ground down to the dust, only not dying of starvation, just holding on to an existence from which everything that makes for comfort or for joy had been sternly withheld. The

faces, the apparel, the movements, the voices, of that endless procession of penury told the same dismal story. These were the unskilled, the loafers, the men who did odd jobs for all manner of employers, the women who went out charing in mean houses, the girls who slaved and withered in mean shops.

How different from Skepton, with its daily work and daily bread assured by prosperous trade, its stalwart workmen tramping home to dinner! How much better the ring of the iron clogs than the slipshod feet shuffling along the greasy London pavement. There food and shelter were assured, and shelter meant home, with all the amenities of home on a humble scale. Claudia knew the front-parlours where the photographs on the walls and the knitted window-curtains were as precious to the owners as the Mortlake tapestry and the Greuze and Watteau in the Park Lane picture gallery had ever been to her father and mother. At Skepton she had seen a life of organised employment with the assurance of bread, and much more than bread. This London slum was the land of the day-to-day struggle for the day's food, and here the lure of the gin-shop that offered fire-water instead of food could seldom be resisted.

She had heard wiseacres talking gravely of a diminishing population, but here she saw the other side of the question. Here were the masses crowding upon each other's heels; the houses where every room harboured a family; the gutters where the children tumbled over each other in the dirt, and fought for a rotten orange or a cabbage-stump, children, who, except in the one-day bliss of a school-feast, had never known what it was to have enough to eat. The public-houses were built out of the blood of such children, dead in babyhood; the publicans were growing rich out of the wages of such children's fathers and mothers. There, where ten years ago a shabby brick façade had looked grimly on the grim street, a blaze of colour and gold and encaustic tiles made a patch of incongruous splendour in the dull and dirty prospect.

Claudia wondered at the magnificence of these gin

palaces, these colossal lamps of dazzling glass and gilded iron, so much costly show amidst such shabbiness and neglect. She expected to see the drink-shops of the poor on a par with their dwellings, or, at any rate, with their greengrocers' and chandlers', and these were mean enough.

She was glad when the carriage left that crowded highway and turned into a long grey street, the most depressing street she had ever seen, an endless line of small squalid houses, where never a flower broke the grey monotony, and where the narrow iron-railed forecourts were merely receptacles for waste paper and empty provision tins. She remembered her horror at first sight of those monotonous streets at Skepton, the long rows of square stone houses, lying against the shoulder of the hill; but there everything was clean and trim, shining windows, muslin curtains, brightly-painted doors, and steps white, red, or yellow, according to the householder's fancy, and everywhere the indication of cleanly instincts and industrious habits. Here there was the monotony of hue as well as the monotony of form, for everything was of one colour, and that was the colour of dirt.

Dismal, dismal, dismal, forlorn and unhappy place! There was great need of mission and of preacher in this nether-world of gloom, gloomy even in the golden glory of the westering sun.

St. Bartholomew's was a huge barn-like building that had been designed—and wisely designed—to give space for numbers and a facility for cleanliness, rather than to feast the eye on Gothic splendours or soothe it with dim religious light, or the glow of painted windows. It was very bare and cold-looking, the benches were a dull drab, the long narrow windows of pale green glass, the walls light grey. The only ornament was the east window, high above the altar, where the figure of the Shepherd of Souls, the gracious figure, with a lamb in His arms, showed in subdued splendour of amethyst and sapphire. It was a fine window, given by one who loved the poor, and it would not have done discredit to a church in Mayfair. It was the one redeeming feature of that un-

lovely temple, the one thing beautiful for the congregation to look at.

Although Claudia entered the church ten minutes before the service was to begin, she found it full of people, so full that the respectable-looking youth who took her in charge had some difficulty in finding her a seat. All seats were free, and very few were unoccupied, though the one clamorous bell was still calling the faithful with harsh insistence. A decent-looking woman of the charing-sisterhood made room for her, and when she rose from her knees and looked round the church she found herself in the midst of such a congregation as she had never seen before. She thought of the chapel on the wind-blown common in Browning's "Christmas Eve," and she wondered if she would fall asleep before the sermon was well under way, and be visited with some splendid vision of the Saviour and Judge of men. The figure over the altar, the amethystine robe, the golden halo above the divine head, through which the fading light showed faintly, might well suggest some apocalyptic dream.

A door opened at the last stroke of the bell, and the choir filed in and took their places below the altar, a choir in fustian jackets or alpaca coats, shopmen or mechanics. The neighbourhood was too poor to maintain a surpliced choir, and the incumbent was a severe utilitarian, a broad churchman who was opposed to all expenditure upon the æsthetic needs of his congregation, while so many of them were below the hunger line. He had contrived to bring them to that bare unlovely church by sheer force of character, and by the class of men he had brought to help him. He knew the strange varieties of mankind among whom he worked, and he had a keen sense of the kind of teaching they wanted.

The priests followed the choir, first a broad-shouldered man of middle-height, with grey hair and beard, the incumbent; then the mission preacher, tall and thin, with dark hair streaked with silver, strongly-marked features, and dark eyes. Claudia, was near enough to see that they were eyes of power, eyes that in one long steady look round the crowded

ranks seemed to reckon and register the varieties of the flock.

Evensong began with a hymn, in which the greater part of the congregation joined. It was the old evening hymn, the simplest, perhaps the best of vesper hymns, and these poor people in whose toilsome lives the glory of the summer day counted for not much more than it does for the workers underground, thanked God for "all the blessings of the light." The evening service was curtailed of all optional prayers, and even the Royal Family came off one prayer short, while the clergy were not mentioned. But the Psalms were sung with tremendous effect by the congregation as well as the choir, the Genius of music, who seems strangely to favour the proletariat, having distributed fine voices and correct ears generously among these sons of toil.

The people and the service interested Claudia. The incumbent had a strong delivery, in accord with his strong figure, and read the lessons well; and it was interesting to see how many among the congregation listened to those familiar chapters as to a new thing.

Then while "Jesu, lover of my soul," was sung to a pianissimo accompaniment, sung with a dying fall, the pulpit lamps were lighted, and the mission preacher's tall spare figure ascended the pulpit stairs.

He gave out his text in quiet tones, scarcely raised above the level of household speech, but with a voice of that rare quality which can reach the farthest corner of a church without any effort of the speaker, a voice low, grave and deep, but not with that laboured and sonorous depth which, when most magnificent, is apt to be inaudible as to words and meaning, a voice and nothing more.

"I will even make a way in the wilderness."

He repeated his text, looking round the church, searching the distance with falcon gaze. The dusk of evening had crept over the scene, and high above his head that figure of the Divine Shepherd looked pale and dim. The one vivid light in the big building

was the glare of the two gas burners lighting the preacher's face.

Then, in the simplest language, he began to talk to the people. As Mary had told her mistress, it was not pulpit oratory. It was the familiar speech of one who has so much to say that the words overcrowd each other sometimes in his impassioned thought, his infinite pity and regret, pity for his hearers' sorrows, regret for their wrong-doing. He told them that this was his third sermon upon a subject that he had deeply at heart—"Temperance."

"When I came among you, and went about among you, it did not take me long to find out the canker-spot in most of your lives, and I made up my mind that I would preach to you at least once every week upon this incalculable horror of drink. In every seven sermons that I had to preach, one should be an appeal to your better feelings, urging you to cure yourselves of the foul disease that is at the root of half your miseries, and, cured of which, your lives would be lightened of half their burdens. Nobody need be in doubt as to the shape that Satan wears among the struggling classes of this great city. Your devil is the devil of strong drink, and his hand is heavy upon you, and it is heavier upon your innocent children, your children who are born in the atmosphere of intemperance, who carry the drunken taint in their blood, sometimes an ineradicable poison, who see drunken sights and hear drunken sounds, who come to think it a joke when daddy lies like a log, without sense or motion—a loathsome thing that scares them to look upon, till custom has made it common—or when he mutters thickly in gibberish that makes them laugh. They know all about it. Daddy is drunk again. Daddy was drunk last Saturday, and will be drunk next Saturday; and that is why daddy's children have to live on bread and cheap dripping for the best part of the week, and seldom get enough even of that."

And then, warming with his subject, entering into those miserable lives, painting all the horrors of the streets and the houses where the drink-devil is king,

he described the Wilderness of the Drunken City, the barren homes, where all that once made for comfort had been pawned to buy gin, where industry, self-respect, cleanliness, the cherishing of children, affection for the helpless and the old, are known no more, where wives and husbands hate each other to the verge of murder, and hate the helpless offspring whose crying is a cry for bread.

He did not talk to them as one who could not make allowances, who could not see that it is not a strange thing for misery to seek oblivion in the gin-palace, for shivering humanity to creep from a fireless hearth to the warmth and light of the public-house; but he reminded them that the world they lived in was not forgotten by the prosperous and the happy, that a few doors from the blazing lights and the brawling voices of the tavern there was the people's coffee-house, where warmth and shelter were to be had on much easier terms than in the drinking-shop in which they were only welcome while they went on drinking. He talked to them of the people's eating-houses, in which their Queen had taken so keen an interest, where a wholesome meal cost no more than a glass of gin; and of the free library where they might have rest and comfort, books that would carry them out of the dull round of their daily lives into brighter and happier worlds—the world of travel and adventure, the world of wonderful things, science, art, animal nature, the world of famous men and women, saints and heroes. Stories of the past that would set them thinking how, even in their narrow lives, there might be found scope for ambition and heroic struggle, the struggle to escape out of darkness into light.

He told them how in his round from door to door in that wilderness of streets he could tell before he had been five minutes in a house whether the drink-devil was master there; the pinch of penury, the wife's sad face and depressed manner, where the husband was the drunkard; the lower depth of dirt and squalor where the wife was no better.

And then he pictured the home of patient industry, of self-restraint and thrift, the home where husband

and wife united in one earnest unceasing effort to make a way in the wilderness; the cheerful aspect of a house brightened by cleanliness, by open windows, a narrow strip of garden carefully cultivated, flowers on window-sills, a print out of a newspaper neatly framed, trifles within the reach of every wage-earner who has learnt the lesson of thrift, and who never forgets that his narrow means leave no surplus for self-indulgence.

He spoke of simple pleasures, the jaunt in the tram-car that would carry them to fresher air and fairer scenes—Greenwich Park, Blackheath, Dulwich, with its picture gallery; or even the evening's amusement at a suburban theatre to see a good play—for the good plays do come to the suburban theatres, and would be brought there oftener if the playgoers would take the trouble to find out what plays were best worth seeing. He looked upon the theatre at its best as a means of education second only to the library and the museum, and he hoped that in time to come Shakespeare's plays would be acted many times in a year at every popular theatre.

So far, and with much more of argument and remonstrance, his discourse had been rather a temperance lecture than a sermon in the common acceptance of the word; but the appeal to the higher nature, the talk of spiritual things, followed upon the talk of life's daily cares; and then the preacher's manner and mood changed, and he rose to an eloquence that moved many of his congregation to tears. It was only the old familiar argument, the appeal from the seen to the unseen, the promise of that better life which is to compensate the faithful servant of Christ for all that he has suffered and lost and been denied in his earthly pilgrimage; rest instead of labour, beauty instead of ugliness, infinite riches, the riches of a heavenly home, instead of grinding poverty, an eternity of bliss after sixty or seventy years of drudgery and deprivation.

He had spoken to them in the plainest and most commonplace language until now, but in this closing portion of his discourse he set no restraint upon his

emotions. He did not talk down to his congregation, but spoke as one who wanted to lift their thoughts to his own level, until they should be able to see as he saw the heavens opened, and the Son of Man in His glory, until they should believe as he believed in a Redeemer who had died on earth that they might be made fit for heaven. He was not afraid to speak to them in the language of great poets and great thinkers; and the tears, the rapt attention of his hearers, indicated that however high he had soared in his impassioned effort to bring spiritual truths home to their untrained minds, he had not gone beyond their power to follow him.

Claudia was strongly impressed by the preacher in this higher flight, by the grand face lighted with the fire of strong feeling, by the eyes darkly bright under the strongly marked brows; but it was the voice that moved her most, magnificent in tone, but potent above all by the assurance of absolute sincerity, a voice that seemed to speak straight from the heart of the man to the hearts of his flock, love asking for love, faith asking for belief, the thrilling appeal of the man who cares for the fate of his fellow man.

"I don't wonder that dear old Mary was moved by such preaching," she thought, as the last clause in an ascending scale of passionate appeal rang out and closed with a startling suddenness, but behind that thought were deeper thoughts. It was not only the warm heart of the servant that had been stirred. Mary's mistress felt as if an unknown world had opened before her. It was Michael's world, that world whose ills Michael and his companions the Free Friars wanted to help or to mend. These people here to-night were the kind of people to whom Michael had given the days of his youth, for whom he would have worked till the end of life, but for that accident of his father's illness, which had brought him back to Park Lane and given him as a prey to a heartless wife.

Her conscience smote her sorely in the long drive home, through the same streets, more terrible in the glare of gas, more crowded by lean figures and famished faces, and noisy with discordant voices, hawkers

shouting, men and women brawling, children screaming. She remembered how she had refused to interest herself in Michael's work, how she had scoffed at his mission as a craze, the idle dream of idle youth, of no more account than the sports and pleasures of other young men, just a distorted view of life and its duties, energy wasted, enthusiasm misdirected. And now she had seen for what kind of sufferers and sinners he had striven, and what need there was of such energy and such enthusiasm. It was a bitter thought that, had she stood by him and sympathised with him, and even helped him in his work, he might never have taken his hand from the plough.

She wondered if the man she had heard to-night had fought the good fight against the world, the flesh, and the devil, against home-influences, friends, the pleasures and ambitions of the common herd, whether it had been as difficult for him to shake off the trammels of the trivial life as it had been for her brother. He had the manner of one who had fought and conquered, the grand air, the ease and authority of a man who was sure of himself and his destiny, and in whose mind there was no shadow of turning.

Old Mary was eager and excited at the hair-brushing hour.

"Well, miss, do tell me what you think of him."

"No one can doubt that he is an orator, and that he knows how to speak to the heart as well as to the mind."

"That's where it is, Miss Claudia, he goes straight to our hearts. I hope he made you cry."

"No, you dear old Mary, I am not easily melted."

"But I'm sure you'll want to hear him again."

"Yes, I should like to hear him again, upon a different subject. I don't want another temperance lecture."

"Ah, but that's what *they* want, miss. My cousin told me that hundreds and hundreds took the pledge after his first sermon, and more after his second. Even though they may not stick to it there's something gained if it keeps them sober for a month."

"For a week more likely—till Saturday's wages."

"Oh, miss, there must be some that want to turn over a new leaf. Well, you've only next week to hear him. That'll be the end of him at St. Bartholomew's. He's going to a parish at the East-end of London the week after."

And then Mary expatiated upon the irresistible preacher. He had spent seven years as a missionary in Africa—she had heard him tell the story of his work there, a pathetic story, something of failure, but much of success.

* * * * * *

The preacher's voice was a haunting voice, and Claudia thought of him very often during the following week, but she let more than a week go by before she went on her second pilgrimage to St. Bartholomew's.

"I don't want to hear another temperance lecture," she told Mary.

"He took Wednesday evenings for temperance, miss. He finished up with them last night. I was there. There were women sobbing as if their hearts would break, and men with their heads bent down, ashamed of their old ways. They went to the vestry in crowds —men and women—girls and boys even among them—and he was there for an hour, taking down their names in a book, with their promises to reform, and their own signatures against them. He is to come back next year, and then he will go about among them again, and find out if they have kept their word."

"Hard work, I'm afraid."

"He doesn't mind hard work, Miss Claudia. That's what he lives for—to do his Father's work."

Claudia went on Friday evening, the last but one of the mission services at St. Bartholomew's. There were a great many cabs and carriages setting people down at the church door this evening, for an impressionist had given a highly-coloured account of the mission preacher and his methods in an evening paper, and the common thirst for something novel in religious oratory, the common desire for sensation, had brought a good many people to the big bare church. The sidesmen were flurried and hard pushed to find room for these gentilities; but Claudia made her own way

through the crowd and secured a corner seat not too far from the pulpit.

This evening's discourse was an address to fathers and mothers, an appeal on behalf of their children, the children whose lives and destinies, spiritual and temporal, soul, mind, and body, were in their parents' keeping, and for whom they would have to render account at the Great Audit. The subject gave full scope for eloquence, and the preacher brought common-sense and the dry light of reason, imagination, force and passion, to bear upon a theme that moved him deeply. There was more power and more poetry in the sermon of to-night than in his counterblast against drink; and Claudia listened with a mental absorption that made her feel, when the last words were spoken, like a sleeper suddenly awakened. She looked round the crowded church almost with wonder. Where had she been? The world that he had been talking of was an unknown world of high thought and strong emotions, a world where men and women were called upon for self-sacrifice, bidden to be the martyrs of daily drudgery and daily duty, to live for their children, to make the path smooth for the little feet, however rough the way might be for themselves, to live the life of self-surrender, looking for their reward in the heavenly country, among the angel-faces of the children who had gone before.

In the course of his sermon he had made an urgent appeal for a Children's Hospital, lately opened in the midst of that populous district. He was addressing the very poor, the measure of whose contributions must be a few pence. Claudia thought he must have known that his preaching had brought strangers from prosperous places, and that it was to them he appealed.

He had told them at the beginning of his sermon that he would have to say good-bye to them on the following night, and that it would be the greater part of a year before he could hope to speak to them again.

"I have made myself very familiar with your homes during these four weeks that I have been living among you, and it is there that I shall look for the sign of

better things when I come back to you. It is there I shall look for the new light, the new hope, cleanliness, decency, thrift, sobriety, better and happier lives."

* * * * * *

The preacher's voice haunted Claudia through a sleepless night. She had told herself after the first hearing that it was a haunting voice. He had compelled her to think of the sons of toil as she had never thought before, this world outside the world of Skepton, the lower-grade labour, the unskilled, uncertain, casual work; a life in which thrift would seem impossible, since there was nothing to save, cleanliness and decency impracticable, and drunken oblivion the only possible relief.

How little could the wealth of the few accomplish to change the lot of that seething populace! Yet something she felt herself called upon to do.

There was the hospital for which he had pleaded; and there were the clubs he had talked about, places of shelter and ease, of sweetness and light, in the gloom of that nether world. Those at least she could help.

She telegraphed to the preacher early on the following morning.

"To the Reverend William Murray:—

"I want to help those poor people. Will you kindly call upon me this afternoon at any time convenient to yourself.

"Claudia Rayner.

"The White House,
"Park Lane."

The reply came promptly. He would call at four o'clock.

"I wonder whether he has ever heard of Ralph Rayner's daughter and her millions," she thought.

Her address would be enough to tell him that she had power as well as desire to help the poor. She wondered what manner of man he was, out of the pulpit. The figure in the dusk of the great church, with the light concentrated upon the strongly marked

face, was distinguished, imposing, unforgettable; but the man, as distinct from the orator, might be a commonplace person, like certain actors or opera-singers who had disappointed her when she met them in every-day life. Certainly no preacher whom she had ever heard, and she had heard many of the best, had impressed her as this man had done. But then she had only heard fashionable preachers, preaching to West-end congregations, appealing to cultivated minds, talking to people who seemed to have no share in the elementary passions of mankind.

She walked in the Park with her dogs, she spent an hour at her piano, she read for an hour or two, ranging from book to book, a sure mark of restlessness, so very anxious to know what this stranger would be like. Ultra pious, perhaps, freezing her with his professional piety, quite too good for common life, breathing reproof in every word.

She was pacing the room in her restless way when the servant announced "Mr. Murray," and she turned quickly to receive him.

"It is very kind of you to come," she said, offering him her hand.

And then she found herself blushing like a schoolgirl at the sudden thought that he must think it strange that she had summoned him, and strange that she should be here alone, unchaperoned and uncompanioned, to receive a total stranger, when it might have been enough for her to have sent him a cheque.

"It is very kind of you to wish to help my people," he said, in the grave quiet voice that was as perfect in its subdued tone as in the fervour of oratory.

His manner had the tranquil ease of a man for whom all social situations were equal. He looked down kindly at Rag, who after a growl or two of interrogation had recognised a friend of his species, and wanted to be noticed, while Chieftain looked at the stranger from the loggia, with his Vere de Vere repose of manner, a dog who cared for nobody but the footman who attended to his dinner.

And then Claudia began to apologise and explain.

"Perhaps I ought not to have given you the trouble to come here," said Claudia, "but I wanted so much to hear more about those poor things. I want to help them as substantially as I can by subscribing to their hospitals and clubs—those admirable clubs which must be such a comfort to them."

"They have done wonders in many cases," he said.

She seated herself at her table in the wide window opening on the loggia, and he took the chair which she indicated, opposite her own, the table scattered with books between them.

"I know something of the working classes," she said, and then she told him about Skepton and the hospitals and clubs that had been established there under her father's rule.

"Skepton has known nothing but prosperity and progress for many years. It is a different world from the streets I saw last night," she said in conclusion.

His tranquil manner had relieved her of that sudden shyness that had come upon her in those first moments. She no longer thought of what he might be thinking of her. She thought only of him.

He was splendid, as splendid sitting there in her drawing-room as he had seemed when his face was the one spot of light in the darkening church. She did not think that anybody would have called him handsome, but the distinction, the authority in the face and bearing were of more account than mere beauty of line and colour. His features were regular but rough-hewn, with none of those fine lines that suggest the sensuous temperament. The brow and dark grey eyes, the firm mouth and chin, were instinct with power, power to love and power to hate, she thought presently, when he was telling her of the kind of people he worked for, their virtues and their vices, their friends and their enemies.

He told her how, after seven years of missionary work in Africa, he had come home to take up his mission in the crowded cities of Great Britain, among the masses to whom the teaching of Christ was almost as unfamiliar as it had been on the shores of Lake

Nyassa before the white man went there. He had given the years of his youth to the far-off land, and he meant to give the years of his middle life, the years of maximum strength in brain and body, to the heathens of his own colour and his own language.

"You will not stay here always," she said. "I have heard that Africa is irresistible, that the man who has once been there, most of all who has lived there for years, must go back. The mountains and the lakes call him."

"Yes, there is a charm, no doubt, the charm of Nature in its grandest aspect, a vast solitude, undefiled by crowded humanity, and the charm of a simple people, with a great capacity for affection and generous feeling. I often dream of Nyassa and awake with the sobbing of its waters in my ears—and am sorry to find myself in a London lodging."

"You will go back," she said, smiling at him. "It is inevitable."

They seemed to have become friends in half an hour of earnest talk. They had told each other so much, she of her kingdom at Skepton, he of his gentle savages, the women and boys who had wept when he left them, the little brown children rolling in the sunshine like puppies, and just as affectionate as puppies. She could see that he liked to talk of Africa, and she encouraged him by her questions.

He rose suddenly and took up his hat, as two solemn-looking footmen brought in tea-tables, moving like well-bred ghosts.

"I am afraid I have been boring you horribly," he said. "I am a rank egotist when I talk of Nyassaland."

"No indeed. I have been more interested than I can say. Please don't go. You have not told me what I am to do for the Children's Hospital or for the clubs."

"That is hardly my business. I will send you the names of the people who are most concerned, and you can send them whatever you like. They are all in want of money—money to enlarge and improve existing buildings, or to build something better. Space

is always the first question. I should like you to see the hospital, where there is room for a new wing, and I should like you to know the kind people who have started a club for working-women, which is practically a school of domestic industries, with a crèche attached to it, and another club for girls, with a large room where they can dance or do musical-drill every other evening in winter."

"Yes, I should much like to see those clubs—I shall be able to compare them with Skepton."

"It would not be a fair comparison. Your father had a free hand, and money was of no consequence. But in a London slum the problem is to make a shilling do the work of a sovereign."

She made him tell her about the clubs, their humble beginning, their gradual development, the ever increasing number of members who were but the few out of the many in that dense population. He told her things about the people which showed his close intimacy with their lives and his perfect understanding of their characters.

"And you have only known that neighbourhood for a month," she said; "it is wonderful that you could have found out so much about them."

"I have known a good many other neighbourhoods," he answered, with his grave smile, "and humanity is pretty much the same in every parish. One has to take surrounding circumstances into account, before one appraises the man or the woman. I have discovered a curious likeness between human beings, whether they are black or white, savage or civilised."

"I think it must be that power to look below externals that makes a missionary," Claudia said. "The general idea of the coloured races seems to be that they are not quite human, and that they must never be allowed to become so. They are to be kept in their places, kept at their present level—not an inch higher. And that being so, it must be waste of power to teach them the gospel."

"Yes, I daresay that is the average Englishman's idea!"

When he had taken a second cup of tea, she went

back to her writing-table and opened her cheque-book, but he stopped her.

"I would rather you sent your money to the people in authority," he said. "My connection with St. Bartholomew's will cease to-morrow."

"Only for eleven months!"

"That is a long time. I want you to become acquainted with the people who are permanently associated with the district. You will like them, I think, and like to work with them."

She gave a faint shudder.

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I don't think I am of the stuff of which ministering angels are made. I have a sickening dread of ghastly sights and loathsome places. But I want to help them substantially, if they will let me."

"They will be glad to take all you may be kind enough to give them. And if you care to go about among their protégés, I would answer for their not bringing you face to face with revolting things. You should see nothing worse than struggling poverty, and people who are trying to lift themselves above their surroundings."

He seated himself at her table and wrote several addresses, then rose to bid her good-bye.

She thought it was the end of their acquaintance, and yet a few minutes ago she had felt as if they were friends for life. She gave him her hand silently, but when she had rung the bell and he was near the door, she said suddenly—with a catch in her voice:

"I hope you will come and see me again, Mr. Murray, and tell me something more about your London work. If—if you knew my brother's history you would understand what reason I have to be interested in all such work."

"I shall be very glad to call on you again if I can possibly find time before I go to Scotland."

"You are going to Scotland?"

"Yes, after a month at the East-end. I am going to work at Edinburgh and Aberdeen."

"I only know the Highlands."

"The pleasure-ground of Great Britain. I assure

you our lowland cities are by no means without interest. And Edinburgh has been called beautiful. English people are generally asleep when they pass through it."

"Is Edinburgh your native place?"

"No. I was born in Aberdeen. My grandfather was a weaver, and my father a professor at Marischal College. Good-bye."

He was gone, the weaver's grandson, the grandest man she had ever seen, or, at least, she thought so. It might be the pulpit glamour, or, perhaps, something in her own life, a crisis in her loneliness in which the sense of absolute isolation had become suddenly oppressive. Whatever the cause, she had a feeling about this man that she had never known before. Her heart had gone out to him with an irresistible impulse, as if with his coming into her life she had all at once realised her need of a friend.

When the door closed upon him she knew for the first time what isolation meant. She had shut out all the people who had wanted to love and cherish her after their lights—her Uncle Mathew, her Aunt Louisa, the Rayner cousins and the Safford cousins. She had chosen to live alone in her palace of art, and had been almost happy; and now, in a moment, with the closing of a door, she felt an aching sense of loneliness.

"I haven't a friend in the world," she thought, "not one human being to whom I can open my heart, who thinks as I think, or better, much better. A woman's friend should stand on a higher plane than herself. He must not be on her level, much less below her level. He must stand so high that he will lift her up. She must climb and reach him."

And then she thought: "What a friend this man would be if he ever cared to give time and thought to one trivial woman. But he is sent to save the masses, not to brighten one wretched existence. And yet what a friend, what a counsellor, what a tower of strength such a man might be, with his immense power of sympathy, the power to enter into the lives and needs and sorrows of other people, a

power so rare and so little cultivated, since with those who possess it self-love intervenes and they harden their hearts for fear of becoming morbid."

It would be dreadful if she were never to see him again. She longed to tell him the story of Michael's lofty aspirations and blighted life. The creed and aims of the two men were almost identical; but the men were different. In Michael emotion had been the dominating note; in William Murray the dry white light of reason was the ruling force. There was sensibility, warmth of heart, divine pity for the sorrows of men—in these attributes the preacher and Michael were alike—but this was not a man to be turned from his purpose by any earthly influence. The love-light that had lured Michael from his chosen path would have no power over William Murray.

The courier called for orders next morning, and even ventured to remind Miss Rayner that the summer was waning, while incomparable weather for travelling was being wasted. Miss Rayner had not made up her mind about her route or her destination. Her table was covered with maps and guide-books. Lady Delabole had told her that she need never look at a time-table. Delfino's brain contained the whole Continental Bradshaw of the current year.

Delfino was disappointed; but became a shade more cheerful when Claudia told him to charge her with his London expenses while awaiting their departure.

Claudia came upon a notice of one of Murray's sermons in an evening paper. His crusade against drink was fluttering the dove-cots of Bow, and there had been crowded congregations at the very modern church where the mission-services were being held. It was nearly a fortnight since the drawing-room door had shut upon him. More than once Claudia had almost given way to the desire to hear him again, and had resisted. She hated herself for wanting to run after a preacher, like any of the foolish young women she had known who were always raving about some new light, and had a new set of convictions every season. But after reading the picturesque reporter's

account of the East-end congregation, Claudia thought it would be interesting to see the effect of Mr. Murray's eloquence upon, perhaps, a still lower section of humanity, the very dregs and refuse of the working world.

The church was crowded almost as the Roman churches were when the wonderful Fra Agostino was preaching, and Claudia had considerable difficulty in finding a seat. She was surprised to see the number of well-dressed people sprinkled among the fustian jackets and threadbare gowns, the ostrich feathers of Bond Street by the side of the bugled bonnets that looked as if they had been retrieved from the dustman's cart, the jetsam and flotsam of cast-off finery. The preacher had been written about, in perfervid journalese, and the classes had come to hear the apostle of the masses.

This time again Claudia had to hear a sermon upon the Drink Plague, and the power and freshness of that address gave her a new measure of the preacher's capacity. Not once in his eloquent extemporising did he echo the phraseology of his former sermon. Every argument, every turn of speech seemed to spring from the passion of the moment, almost as if he had just awakened to the magnitude of this vice which was sapping the life and the strength of the people. He talked to them as friend to friend, as brother to brother, always reminding them of man's infinite capability of improvement, always holding up the lamp of hope above the darkness in which too many of them were grovelling, because they loved darkness better than light. That he was able to reach their understanding and to touch their hearts was evident from the silent absorption in which they listened, from the women's tears, and most of all from the throng that pushed its difficult way to the vestry at the end of the service, to register the pledge of reform.

Claudia had more difficulty in leaving the church than even in finding a seat, as that movement towards the vestry interfered with the progress towards the door. The congregation behaved very well under trying conditions, for the heat in those last minutes

was overpowering, in spite of open windows, and it might be feared that the first irresistible impulse of the fustian jackets would take them to the nearest beer-shop, so difficult must it be to expel thirsty nature on a sultry August evening.

Claudia was longing for the open air, and wondering how long it would be before the slowly-moving crowd in front of her would pass into the glimmering spot of blue which she saw above their heads in the distant doorway, when a girl's voice whispered her name, and looking round she saw two of the Bond Street hats close to her shoulder.

"Claudia, to think of your being here!" in a loud whisper.

The wearers of the hats were old friends, Lady Blanche and Lady Patricia Barham, girls she had liked as much as it was in her nature to like girls, a pair of feather-heads, very amiable, very "sweet," but girls with whom she had few ideas in common. They were pretty and popular, and had sparkled at her mother's parties. They each clutched a hand, and would not let her go till they were out in the open.

"What on earth brought you to hear him?" Lady Blanche asked excitedly.

"I have been reading about his sermons."

"Yes, to be sure. Those ubiquitous reporters! Why can't they let the poor have their Saint all to themselves? He is like St. Francis, you know. He is the preacher of the poor. Nothing is farther from his thoughts than to be the fashion. He hates anything of that kind."

"Then why do you and Patricia bring Magnolia's hats to the East-end?"

"Oh, *we* are working with him; we are his converts."

"To temperance? I thought you drank nothing stronger than China tea."

"To philanthropy. We were leading the futile life he abhors—doing absolutely nothing for our fellow creatures—thinking it a horrid bore when a guinea was dragged out of us for this or that charity—when we happened to hear of his wonderful preaching. We

were not a bit better than you, Claudia. We heard a man talk about him at a dinner-party, and we went to Deptford to hear him just for a sensation, and from that time we have simply worshipped him."

"That was two years ago, and we never rested till we had done something for our fellow-creatures," said Patricia.

They were standing in the street, buffeted by the crowd that was slowly dispersing. Claudia's footman had gone for the carriage, which was a good way off on a rank of cabs and broughams in a side street, the traffic of the great thoroughfare brooking no interference.

"You must tell me all about it," she said, "while we wait for our carriages."

"My dear child, we have no carriage. It would be as much as our lives are worth to bring a carriage to the East-end—if mamma's coachman would consent to come, which he wouldn't. Our people are at Marienbad, and we are in Park Street to refit before our autumn visits. Fancy your being in London after the season!"

"I have not been taking any account of seasons."

"No, poor dear, we know. May we come and see you?"

"Of course you may," Claudia answered promptly, these feather-heads having suddenly become interesting. "Come to tea to-morrow. You will find me alone with my dogs. Here comes the brougham. If you don't mind squeezing, I could take you home."

They all crowded into the little carriage, and Claudia went home in a cloud of chiffon and feathers and an atmosphere of Parma violets. She had considered these two girls among the silliest, the most conventional of the herd, girls who copied every movement and turn of phrase of other girls, who seemed purely automatic followers of the prevailing fashion in all they thought and said and did, whose only desire was to be "in the movement," not to become a "back number." It seemed incredible that such girls should have had their hearts moved by the Apostle of the poor.

They appeared at tea-time next day, delighted to be received as intimates in a house that they had known only in its festive aspect, Claudia always having kept them aloof.

"I have never learnt to suffer fools gladly," she said when her mother wanted her to make friends with girls of their calibre. But now, finding them enthusiastic followers of William Murray, her heart softened towards them, and she received them with smiles and cordial welcome.

"What ages and ages since we have been in these exquisite rooms," said Blanche. "Do you remember, Patsy? Dear Lady Magdalen's music-party—Plançon, Holmann, Albani—I think it was the last."

"Yes," Claudia said gravely, "it was the last."

Her eyes clouded with sudden tears. The girl had touched too deep a note in the diapason of memory, that last party, a social triumph, her mother surrounded by all that was most brilliant and most imposing in society, petted and praised by royal personages and ambassadors, worshipped by artists, adored by her chosen friends, beautiful exceedingly, with the beauty of womanhood that has always been cherished, still in her zenith: and three days afterwards there had come the admission that her occasional *malaise* was not entirely a question of nerves, that there was a mysterious pain, a trouble that came and went, one knew not why, nothing of any consequence, but—perhaps, it might be as well to consult somebody—one of those clever doctors who look after women. And then next day the consultation—and the verdict—hopeful for the patient, whose spirits must not be dashed; deadly for the patient's husband and children, who have a right to know the truth.

No, Claudia was not likely to forget that last musical evening.

"Nobody ever gave such delicious parties," said Blanche, harping on the same string. "Of course, lots of people spend as much money—but they do not get the same effect. Lady Magdalen had the genius of entertaining. It is a gift, isn't it? Some people can give a charming party, with a cup of tea and a

sandwich in a shabby dining-room, and five-shillings' worth of flowers in the drawing-rooms, while others bore one to death with quails and iced asparagus and the pick of the opera-singers."

"Only the bores go to the boring parties," said Patricia, "and if one happens to drift there by mistake, one's sufferings are only to be expected."

"The bores will go anywhere for ortolans and peaches," said Blanche; "peaches in March, when they cost four or five shillings apiece. And think of the people we were sitting among last night!"

The brown poodle, having discovered that Patricia's frock was quite the softest thing in fabrics, had stretched himself comfortably upon her surplus length of skirt, while Rag, having seen weakness of purpose in Blanche, had jumped on her lap and was making himself acquainted with the last fashionable complexion powder.

"And to think that they can't even have the luxury of a dog, on account of the licence."

They meant the slum people.

"But they couldn't afford to feed a dog, even if there were no licence-money wanted."

"Oh, they would manage to feed him. They would share their last crust with him," said Blanche, hugging Rag.

Chieftain had not left his Persian prayer-carpet in the loggia, coldly incurious about the visitors, and not even greedy.

Claudia ordered the dogs to their rugs, and made the girls bring their chairs to the tea-table.

"Let us sit over our cups like cottagers," she said. "I want you to tell me all about Mr. Murray, and how you came to put your little white hands to his plough."

The two girls went off at score. They had heard of him and read about him, and had gone to hear him preach at Deptford and at Camberwell, and they were tremendously impressed.

"While he was preaching we felt as if we were lifted into another world, as if we were capable of giving up everything trivial and trumpery to go about

among our unhappy fellow-creatures. And then, when it was over and we went home we knew what worms we were, and that we couldn't give up a single thing we cared for—our dogs, our piano, our toilet-tables and jewellery, all our birthday presents and things. We knew that we were worms," concluded Patricia.

"We didn't think much more about him," said Blanche, "till we read his name in a list of parsons who were going to speak at a meeting at the Mansion House, on behalf of a new Children's Hospital to be established in South London, and we tore off to the City without a minute's warning and without telling anybody, and had a struggle to get admitted without tickets."

"There was a bishop, and two West-end rectors, and a City man, and Lord Frankland," said Patricia, "and they all spoke pretty well—but when he began it was something different. We had the same sensation again. We were lifted into another world, where nothing was of any consequence compared with the cry of the poor. He called upon everybody in the crowded hall to do something for suffering humanity. We could all of us help, if we would; but there were too many of us who would not. He looked round at our smart hats and muff-chains and trumpery, and the solitaire-earrings that made flashes of light in the winter greyness, and I felt as if he would wither the ostrich feathers off our heads. He made us think of Savonarola. We could all of us do something. We carried those words home with us, and they were haunting words."

"And that was the beginning of our six poor dears," said Patricia."

Claudia begged for an explanation.

The six poor dears were six old women, each of whom had seen the sun set upon her seventieth birthday, each friendless and forlorn, worn to the bone by over sixty years of toil. For these Blanche and Patricia had found a comfortable shelter. They had taken an eight-roomed house in an obscure neighbourhood, and had furnished it after their own devices,

and had chosen their poor dears, carefully guided by William Murray.

They had taken upon themselves this charge without help from their parents or friends, and they rejoiced in the achievement.

"At least we have done something," said Blanche. "We couldn't have done it if we hadn't a handsome dress-allowance, so I suppose after all papa is the person to be thanked. It hasn't been much of a sacrifice. Savonarola would have scorned us. But we have given up things. Our maid makes *all* our frocks now—and we have to help her. And we trim our own hats. But we are happier than ever we have been since we came out."

"Let me help you," exclaimed Claudia.

"No, no! That would spoil it all. We must do everything ourselves, our own work, our own little economies. Savonarola would have made us throw our hats upon a bonfire. Mr. Murray thinks it good of us to give up Estelle, and you know how we doted on her clothes, and what she can do for even a plain girl."

"We have never asked anyone for money, not even papa," said Blanche. "Would you like to come to tea with the poor dears? We have our weekly tea-party to-morrow afternoon. The house is in a horrid neighbourhood, and miles and miles from anything nice, but we would take you there in a cab. Don't think of taking your carriage. People might throw cabbage-stumps at it. Some of them think it's our luxuries that make them poor."

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The poor dears were a new experience to Claudia, six old women, two of them over eighty years of age, who seemed to have drifted from the four corners of the earth to this London slum, each with a special individuality and a different form of speech, though most of them had caught some touch of the prevailing cockney accent, and all were practised in cockney slang. They were utterly unlike the people of Claudia's kingdom. There the strong flavour of the

soil, local ideas, local prejudices, made a common likeness. There the affections of the people were bounded by the place where they had been born and where they expected to die. Despite their quick intelligence, appreciation of books and music and pictures and plays, the Skepton people were steeped in the Skepton atmosphere, and their chief idea about the outer world was of its inferiority.

The six poor dears were by no means local in their views of life. They had been rolling stones, most of them. Two of them claimed to have begun life as young ladies, and preserved some vestiges of what had once been a grand manner ; one of these had been an actress, the other a governess in many lands. The rest had rolled from place to place in domestic drudgery, in shops, in factories.

All had strong opinions, stronger perhaps by reason of cruel experiences, hardships, and trials, that testified to their fortitude in going on living.

On politics, on literature, as represented mostly by penny novelettes and halfpenny newspapers, on the Church, on the Royal Family, each had views and ideas ; and it was pleasant to find that however socialistic, and, indeed, revolutionary, their opinions might be on general subjects, all were alike in their admiration for their King and Queen, and those Princesses whose names were chiefly known to them by the opening of charity bazaars, clubs, hospitals, and benevolent institutions of divers kinds.

"They do care for the poor," the doyenne of the party said, as they sat at tea. "I only wish some of your Park Lane millionaires was half as good to us."

Claudia laughed at this sally. She was sitting next the doyenne, whose eighty-six years were marked by an irrepressible vitality in speech and movement. Patricia told her that this ancient had a passion for cleaning, and that it was as much as the other inmates could do to keep her from tasks beyond her strength.

"Well, look at that there piece of furniture, don't it pay for elber-grease ?" she asked, when this idiosyncrasy was mentioned, pointing to a Chippendale sideboard that Patricia had discovered in one of the

mean streets, so disguised in dirt that no one had guessed its artistic value, and, in her own phraseology, had bought for "a pound a leg."

But before sitting down to tea the two girls had taken Claudia over the house, proud to show the arrangements they had made, unaided by advice from the wise and experienced. Three of the four bedrooms were allotted to the poor dears, with a pallet bed for each, and for each her chest of drawers, looking-glass and washstand. A nurse-attendant occupied the fourth bedroom, and a fifth room had been made into a bathroom.

"It was of the first importance to keep the poor dears clean, if we were to make friends of them," said Patricia, "and we have made it the nurse's duty to look after them. They didn't all take kindly to soap and water, and the two born ladies were much the worst. They told nurse about the lovely bath-rooms in their father's houses; but she had to be very stern with them before they would consent to their daily tub. But old Mrs. Penniker is a dragon of cleanliness, and is absolutely greedy about strong yellow soap that makes one sneeze only to smell it."

It was amusing to see the evidences of girlish tastes in the shabby old house. The furniture was all of the commonest, save where some thing of beauty, like the Chippendale sideboard, had been bought for a quarter of its value—but there was plenty of ornament in the shape of illuminated calendars, coloured prints out of Christmas Numbers, work-baskets and envelope-boxes, blotting-books, flower-vases, ink-stands, toilet-bottles, china-candlesticks and sofa-cushions, things that had once been cherished treasures in Park Street. These discarded prettinesses gave gaiety and colour to the rooms, and were the delight of the inmates.

The women were each allowed seven shillings a week for maintenance, and they catered for themselves, and clubbed their shillings, or not, as they pleased. Firing and light, and the materials for their laundry, were provided for them.

"The shilling a day is for food only," Blanche

explained. "It seems awfully little, but nurse says they have quite comfortable meals; and once a week we have our tea treat, like this afternoon, and that is *our* affair."

"How did you contrive to find your six old women?"

"He found them for us. We could never have found the real bad cases. We should have collected six impostors," said Blanche. "He took no end of trouble. You see he has been doing mission work in London and the big provincial towns for two years, and he knows all the slums. He had these poor things all in his books, their lives and their circumstances. When we told him we were pining for some good work, he suggested the poor dears. He took our measure, and said we were just capable of managing nice old women. Boys and girls would have boshed us."

"He found this house for us," added Patricia, "a tremendous bargain, for rents are dreadful about here, and rates are worse. Fortunately this house is out of the way of everybody, so we got it cheap."

No proper name had been spoken, but Claudia knew that they were talking of William Murray.

He came into the queer, old-fashioned parlour, before the end of the tea-party, and the nurse-housekeeper appeared with a little brown teapot two minutes after his arrival.

He had been going about all day and was tired, but he brightened as he talked to the little party, taking notice of the old women, with something special to say to each. Claudia almost thought that he had been pleasantly surprised at seeing her there, for a faint flush had come into the pallor of his tired face, and a sudden light into his eyes.

"I had no idea you knew my kind young ladies," he said, as they shook hands.

"I had no idea that they were capable of inventing anything so delightful as this house," Claudia said.

"She thought we were much too frivolous; and so we were, till you smote the stony rock of our hearts."

"And let loose a fountain of kindness," said Murray.

"But we didn't invent anything, you know, Claudia. He was the inventor."

After that the conversation became general, and the poor dears did most of the talking, gently led on by Murray. The tea-party was their treat, and it was their pleasure that had to be considered.

When the table had been cleared, and the poor dears were all sitting at attention, with their eyes fixed on the preacher, Blanche asked him to tell them a story. That was the name the girls had given to his homely exposition of some incident in the gospel, stories familiar to the least assiduous church-goer, yet seeming new when he told them, so intense was his own feeling for the reality of the things he described, so vivid the picture of the sacred life in his own mind as he spoke. His strength was in the faith that had never wavered, the mind that had never lost its hold upon the unseen world.

Five of the poor dears listened with absorbed looks, but one, the youngest and most frivolous of the band, slumbered peacefully in a shady corner. Three sat with their elbows on the table, two in genteeler attitudes with folded hands on muslin aprons. The address lasted less than half an hour, and its teaching was of the simplest, such gentle counsel as might be given to those whose lives were nearly done, whose sins were of the past, whose temptations were of the slightest. To be kind to each other, to make each other happy in this peaceful haven that Providence had found for them, and to look forward to a more abiding home and a more beautiful life in the Christian's better land; this was the only lesson he had for these poor scholars whose task-work in the school of life had been so long and so hard. So completely did he enter into their minds, and see things as they saw them, that it seemed to Claudia as if his one supreme gift must be to talk to old women, and to smooth the last stage of their journey, yet she remembered his temperance sermons, and his understanding of drunkards and idlers, wife-beaters and criminals, and how he had entered into *their* minds, and had been able to show them the full measure and

consequences of their besetting sin, almost as if he himself had gone through the same stages of degradation, and steeped his soul in the same poison. His knowledge of their vice had seemed a personal knowledge, his appeal to repentance and amendment had sounded like the cry of a soul that had been lost and was saved.

Understanding and sympathy, those were his gifts, Claudia thought; but behind those there was that supreme gift of faith, his own assurance of the creed he taught. There was the source of his strength. He was not the man of letters, Platonist, Hedonist, Comtist, Darwinian, stooping to teach a gospel that seemed good for the multitude, while reserving to himself the right to think dreamily—sometimes with Browning, sometimes with Tennyson—of a creed that was at best a Great Perhaps—of a God who was at best "something outside ourselves that makes for righteousness." He was the teacher who believed in Jesus of Nazareth as the visible and incarnate God, the Saviour of men.

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Blanche proposed walking part of the way to the West-end. She wanted Claudia to see her slum.

"It will be a revelation," she said; and Claudia found herself walking beside William Murray through a labyrinth of narrow streets, varied by an occasional paved court, until they emerged at last into a main road that looked endless, since they came into it at a point which showed a far-stretching perspective on either hand, long lines of roofs and chimney-pots, dwindling to a point in the evening sky. He had offered to walk some way with them. It was only six o'clock, and he had plenty of time before the evening service.

"But you were looking so tired when you came in," Patricia said.

"That was nearly an hour ago. Your excellent tea and an hour's rest have made me another man."

"You shall walk with him," Patricia whispered in Claudia's ear, as they were leaving the house. "I want you to be friends. You'll be pouring your

millions into his lap before you know where you are."

The two girls marched in front, Murray and Claudia following; and soon she found herself talking to him in perfect confidence, telling him that which she had yearned to tell him, the story of her brother's life—the life that she feared his own hand had snapped short, in despair that passed the bounds of reason.

"We all tried to believe his death was accidental—but I think we all knew that it wasn't. Even his wicked wife knew that," she said.

He reproved her gently for that word "wicked."

"Remember that

> 'Evil is wrought by want of thought
> As well as want of heart,'"

he said.

"But when does want of thought become sheer wickedness? I think it did in my sister-in-law's case. Absolute selfishness, inordinate vanity, self-love that is blind to a husband's needs and suffering, that can take all and give nothing, not even a minute's thought. Is not that wicked?" and then, without waiting for his answer, she went on:

"I have no right to judge her; for I was nearly as bad. I never interested myself in Michael's altruistic ideas. I never cared to hear about his work; and I helped my father and mother to bring him away from the life he loved. He might be living *now*, happy, and doing infinite good in the world, if we had let him follow his own guiding-star."

"It was a mistake," Murray said gently. "Life is full of such mistakes. But we must not look back too much. Some regret for the past is good, as it means more wisdom in the present; but not to brood upon irrecoverable things. And then there is often a way of making amends. I know a man who added a wing to a children's hospital, because he had once spoken unkindly to a daughter who died in childhood."

"And he liked to think that for that minute's pain he had given to the child he loved, many children would be enjoying days and nights of healing and comfort," said Claudia. "I think you have read my

thoughts. I want to do something for the kind of people my brother worked for. He would have given them all the days of his life if we had let him. I want to help the very poor, the offscouring; but I should like to do it, if it were possible, through the Free Friars, his friends and brothers in holy poverty and good works."

"Yes, it is quite natural you should think of that, and it would be easy to help them. Have you put yourself in communication with them?"

"No, I know nothing about them, not even their names. They were not a formal order. They were just a handful of young men who had given up the world, and who were ready to go to the uttermost ends of the earth if the cry for help came to them. I used to discourage my brother when he wanted to talk to me about them. My mother and I thought that the work was bad for him. We thought him eccentric, a fanatic, and that his enthusiasm was dangerous."

"No doubt some people thought as much about St. Francis of Assisi."

"And since my brother's death, since my father died and left me a great fortune, I have let the time slip. I have done nothing with my superfluous money. It is only since I have heard you plead for the poor that I have resolved upon doing some substantial thing. Will you help me to find Michael's friends, the Free Friars?"

"I will do so with all my heart."

"And when you have found out something about them and their work, will you give me your advice about helping them? You will know how I can be of most use."

"I don't think you will need advice from me, if these men are really what your brother thought them."

"Oh, but remember they are all strangers to me. I want the advice of some one I know—some one I can trust."

"Am I not almost a stranger?"

"No, no," she said impetuously. "You are a

friend. I knew you were going to be my friend the day you came to my house. It was only an hour that we were together—but in that time I had talked to you as I have never talked to the people I used to call my friends. Indeed, to tell you the truth, I have never had a friend. There has always been a wall of ice between me and the people who wanted to be kind to me. Even those girls there," indicating Blanche and Patricia, "I have always kept at arm's-length, thinking them frivolous and empty-headed; and now I find how warm-hearted they are, and what good work they are doing."

They had left the slums and the long shabby road behind them by this time, and they were near the Mansion House; and here they pulled up in a street that was deserted when the business day was done. Mr. Murray found a four-wheel cab to take the three girls home, while he walked back to his East-end church.

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"Well, how did you enjoy your walk through those lovely slums?" Blanche asked eagerly. "Aren't they characteristic? One can understand the people's lives and characters when one sees their shops—the strange things they wear and the stranger things they eat. Could you have believed there were so many bananas or so many scarlet blouses in the world? And the women marketing—such histories in their faces and clothes. I hope you noticed everything."

Claudia was obliged to confess that she had noticed very little.

"We were talking," she said. "I was telling Mr. Murray something very near my heart."

"You were offering to help him. You had begun to feel the glamour," exclaimed Patricia. "And now you will want to pour your millions into his lap. I knew you would."

"I was not offering him my money. I was asking him to help me," said Claudia.

"Oh!" cried Blanche, obviously startled. "Do you want to confess to him?"

"No, I am not that kind of person. I would rather go to the fountain head."

And then she began to talk about the poor dears, and to praise the good work that had been done in that obscure corner of the great city.

"He found the house," said Patricia, "no one else could have done it. He made everything easy. Will you come to tea next Monday? We are giving them an extra treat before we go away. We shall be away ever so long, till the winter, and the poor dears will miss their weekly tea-party."

Claudia accepted the invitation. She wanted to see more of the nice old women. She would go and see them while Blanche and Patricia were away.

"But you are starting on your Continental tour almost directly?"

"Not till the hot weather is over. I may wait till October, and go to the Hartz or the Austrian Tyrol."

Her friends wondered, but said nothing; and then came protests about the cab fare. Not even a millionairess, as the girls called her, could be allowed to pay more than half the fare. She was obliged to accept eighteenpence before she dropped them in Park Street.

"Alone in that big house, with nobody she knows left in London," said Blanche. "Isn't it rather strange?"

"She has got some scheme in her head, something that he is going to initiate for her," Patricia replied, with conviction, as they rushed up-stairs to look at the new frocks from the tailor's, the shooting skirts and golf skirts, and the motor coats, the too solid garments that their maid could not make.

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"He will be my friend. At last I have found a friend," Claudia thought in the solitude of the loggia, watching the shadows in the Park, the slowly-moving figures under the trees, while the stars crept out of the pale grey sky, where a faint glow still lingered in the west.

Her solitary dinner did not last long, three out of

six courses being refused, and peaches and grapes not even looked at. She had smiled when the Wedgwood baskets of fruit were offered to her, remembering the fuss the six poor dears had made about some peaches that Blanche had brought them, and how the ancient, who had begun life as a lady, had enlarged upon the abundance of her grandmother's walled garden in Devonshire.

"He will be my friend," she thought, and then, in a long reverie, she lived over the history of that brief acquaintance, recalling every detail, every word, every look.

She had seen him four times in all—only four times; twice in the pulpit, she sitting among his congregation, a stranger; and twice as a new acquaintance, of whose sentiments towards herself she could know nothing. And yet she knew that he was her friend, that he liked her and believed in her, and that he had come into her life as an abiding presence, not a chance acquaintance.

She sat long in the summer darkness and the warm air, dreaming over those few hours, the tones of his voice, so beautiful, yet so natural and simple, nothing of the man who has taught himself the music of speech, and is listening while he talks, charmed, and his own Orpheus. Nature had given him that perfect voice, and with it many other gifts to make the sum of his power, that wonderful power over his fellow-men, for which the world has no better word than magnetism. She recalled his presence in her drawing-room, her sense of security, after one brief moment of shyness, so quickly set at ease, fearless of misconstruction, a young woman, living quite alone, and receiving a stranger as if he had been a familiar friend. She remembered her sudden sense of loss when the door closed upon him, and she thought he had gone out of her life for ever. And then the delight of this afternoon, to see him again, and to see the flush of gladness in his tired face, as he put down his hat in the queer old panelled parlour, and turned and saw her standing behind one of the old women She could not have deceived herself about the pleased

look in his eyes, the grave, kind smile, as he took her offered hand.

And then the long walk through the sun-baked streets, in the glory of an August evening, while the sun was still high in a heaven of gold. After all she had told him—after his earnest attention, her assurance of his perfect sympathy—what less than friends could they be ?

He was to help her in some great thing that should make atonement for her aloofness from the brother whom she had loved without sympathy or understanding, loved carelessly, unthinkingly, with a heart unchastened by sorrow, wrapped up in her affection for her mother, and contemplating Michael's conduct from her mother's point of view, as a folly of youth that ought to be discouraged, for Michael's sake, as much as for the father and mother who had built their hopes upon his worldly-mindedness.

She counted on seeing him at the old women's tea-party, for Blanche had told her that he always came to talk to her poor dears if it were possible, during his mission. And then there might be another walk through the queer little streets, and the long monotonous road, whose squalor and varieties of life she had hardly seen, walking as in a sunlit avenue somewhere in fairyland, unconscious of things ugly or sordid. She found herself counting the days, and then, with sudden shame, reckoning the hours, that had to pass before that tea-party in one of the shabbiest streets of a forlorn district, a ragged fringe upon a busy quarter, a street that must soon crumble and turn to dust under the pickaxe of the house-breaker, to arise again as a portion of that modern monster the Workman's Dwelling.

She had not to wait for Monday's tea-party to be assured that William Murray was indeed her friend, for Saturday's evening post brought her a long letter from him. He had been hunting for the Free Friars, and had come upon one of the little brotherhood, working quietly in his own district, a young man of humble birth, self-educated, an indefatigable worker, though handicapped by bad health, and from him

Murray had heard all about the brotherhood, and their schemes and hopes. He would tell her more when they met.

And that would be on Monday afternoon. She telegraphed to him on Monday morning. "I hope to see you this afternoon in Carberry Place."

She could not trust the chapter of accidents. His time at the East-end was half gone, in a fortnight he would be in Scotland, gone out of her life. She had not ventured to ask where he would go after Edinburgh, but he had told her that he would not be in London again before the following spring, and she had told him that she would be in the Tyrol in October. But now with this discovery of one of her brother's colleagues, it seemed to her that it would be impossible for her to leave London until at least the foundation had been laid of that great work which was to be the memorial of her brother's blighted life, the one good thing out of that story of failure and despair.

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There is a glamour that can make the wilderness blossom as the rose, and can fill a shabby old eight-roomed house in a squalid neighbourhood with light and beauty. Sitting at that commonplace tea-table, with the two Barham girls, and the six old women, Claudia felt an exquisite, indefinable happiness that she had never known till she met William Murray. He was there, having arrived earlier than usual, and he had seated himself at her end of the table, and his special brown pot of tea had been put in front of her for her to minister to him. He was not looking tired to-day, in spite of the long Sunday, with services early and late. He was full of animation and cheerful talk, inclined to make fun of the poor dears and their patronesses, with the gentlest irony, and charming them all by his power to play upon the individuality of each.

"Lord a' mercy," said old Mrs. Penniker, "I verily believe he knows all we have been saying of and thinking of among ourselves from one week to another."

"I always know when you have been quarrelling," he answered, "there's a spark of fire left in your eyes after the blaze. It doesn't make you handsomer, my dear souls. But last week you have kept good friends. I can hear that in your voices."

"It's only when the memory of better days comes over some of us that we're apt to fall out," said one of the born ladies, in whom an assertion of gentility was apt to take a querulous form.

"We ought to forget the hill we have come down, Miss Marlow, and only think of the hill we are going up. Christian's hill, that leads to the Heavenly City."

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They were in the long road once more. Claudia and the preacher walking side by side, in earnest talk. He had much to tell her about the Free Friars, whose work had made considerable progress since her brother had been among them.

"It was wonderful that you were able to find one of them so quickly," Claudia said.

"They have done too much good not to be known among the kind of people I know, though they go about their business in a quiet way, and are too scattered to make a great impression in any neighbourhood. They have no house, no club, but only an office in some humble quarter of the great cities, where they can meet and plan their work, and audit their accounts. I should like you to see James Lanford, the man I found at the Free Friars' office, in Bermondsey. He knew and loved your brother. Shall I bring him to see you some day before I leave London?"

"Bring him to-morrow if you can, and if you are not too busy."

"I have a good deal to do every day, but I will make time for this business. With your enthusiasm and your means it is likely to be a big business."

"I will do anything that you tell me to do. You will have to think for me, and choose for me, and act for me, as you did for Blanche and Patricia."

"They make too much of my poor help."

"No, no! They are only sensible girls and know their own limits—as I do mine. The whole science of philanthropy is dark to me."

"You will soon become an adept, with your strong brain."

"How do you know that I have a strong brain?"

"I know—but I don't know how I know. That is a more subtle business."

And then, having settled that he was to bring James Lanford to the White House at four o'clock on the following afternoon, and that he was to meditate upon some great scheme in the interim, they began to talk of abstract questions, more familiarly than they had talked yet, as if they had indeed been old friends, while every now and then in Claudia's brain there flashed the thought, "only the third time we have ever been together, only the third time, and I cannot recall what my life was like before I knew him."

That was the mystery of mysteries. She looked back at the old life across the abyss, and it seemed curtained in a cloud. The contrast with that dim past and this vivid present was overpowering.

She talked of the books she had been reading in the last year—scientific, metaphysical, critical, the analysis of thought, the story of evolution; but here she found him unsympathetic.

"I have been trying to educate myself," she said.

"Beating the air," he answered, "at least, that is what it all seems to me after I have spent an evening reading the last of the Schopenhauers or Hartmanns of the day. I think you would have got more lasting good—wider knowledge of life, higher-reaching thoughts—out of a year's close study of——"

She thought he was going to insist upon Scripture as the sole fountain of wisdom, and her heart sank a little for fear of the sacerdotalism that she had dreaded. The name that came was startling.

"Shakespeare."

"Really?"

"There is more of the philosophy of life scattered through Shakespeare's plays than you will find in

the greatest of your twentieth-century psychologists. He has all the wisdom of the ancients, with all the daring and wide outlook of the moderns. There is nothing in the gamut of life that he did not feel and know and comprehend. There is no moral truth that he cannot teach us."

"I have loved Shakespeare on the stage, and among my dearest poets; but I have not taken him so seriously as that," Claudia said.

"I had the misfortune to lose most of my very small library between Zanzibar and Nyassa, and for more than a year I had to live upon two books, the Bible and Shakespeare. Do you know I hardly missed the others, though they were all that I had most cherished of the classics and moderns. My leisure hours for reading seemed only too short. Shakespeare was inexhaustible; and where among modern philosophers could I have found such wisdom or such poetry as I had in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Apocrypha?"

"I shall go back to Shakespeare with a new measure of his genius."

"Oh, my dear Miss Rayner, you are not to take my word for too much. I am outside the world of science, and perhaps I have to wait for the years that bring the philosophic mind. I admire Darwin immensely, the good, brave, patient, generous man, even more than the discoverer; but evolution leaves me cold. I am interested in my fellow-man as he *is*—the living man of to-day, the man that evolution has made, and I don't care by what infinitesimal transmutations, or through what unthinkable ages, he may have become man. From the hour that he could chip a stone axe, still more from the day he kept a dog, he is precious to me, of infinite interest; but I draw the line at his ape-like ancestor and the gradual ascent from protoplasm. You see what a poor creature I am from the scientist's point of view."

"Are not Christians afraid of science, as the enemy of faith?"

"Why should we fear? Let science know! We believe without knowing. We know Christ and the

perfect life. That is enough. All the rest is a question of faith in the unseen and the unknowable. And in the meantime we have been told what our work is here. We have no superfluous leisure to waste on doubt."

After this they talked of general subjects, mostly of books. He had read much in Scotland and in Africa; and, during his mission work in the great cities he had read as much as he could in quiet hours stolen from the brief night. She was not slow to discover that he was an idealist, and that the books he cared for were the books that fed his imagination. Among these history held a high place, and Carlyle and Ruskin were his prophets. He had his heroes and demigods among the mighty dead, and he loved to turn his thoughts backward, and to live in the dream-land of vanished ages.

"I sometimes wonder if those dreams were ever substantial facts," he said, laughing, after he had confessed to being a worshipper of the past. "If Sir Thomas More, or Colet, or Sidney, or any one among our saints and heroes, was ever quite as perfect as we imagine him."

"Distance lends enchantment," Claudia said.

"Distance is enchantment. The man who died yesterday is greater than the living man we know, greater, dearer, more desired. He is gone, and we can never have him back. And when he has been three centuries dead he will be a demigod."

"Or a monster."

"Yes, that is the alternative. History has no neutral tints."

They had come to the parting of the ways, but Claudia went home radiant, and hardly hearing a syllable of Blanche and Patricia's friendly babble, though she chimed in with a word or two now and then.

Parting this evening could hardly be thought of as parting. He was to be with her to-morrow afternoon.

"Now I am sure he is my friend," she thought, sitting alone in the lamplight, while the summer

storm swept against the loggia, and blew about the lace curtains. A footman hurried to shut the windows, but she insisted upon the glass door being left open, even if the rain came into the room.

"Did the man want to suffocate me?" she muttered, when he was gone, starting up from her low chair and beginning to wander about aimlessly. There was fever in her blood to-night—the influence of the storm perhaps.

She went from the small drawing-room to the larger, and then to the picture-gallery, switching on a light here and there as she passed, and making patches of brightness among dark shadows. The long gallery looked a place for ghosts in that alternate light and gloom. She walked from end to end, backwards and forwards, restless, impetuous, and the fever in her blood was not lessened.

"Oh, God!" she whispered, coming suddenly to a stand, in front of the long uncurtained window, with the lightning flashing across her face. "Am I stricken with idiocy? I, Claudia Rayner? Am I in love with this man?"

She sat down in a dark corner, and covered her face with her hands.

"No, no, a thousand times no! I am not in love. No one but a puling school-girl ever falls in love with a man she has seen only three times. A reasonable woman's love is a plant of slow growth. The man must show himself worthy of it. And he must show her that he loves her better than she loves him. Love unsought, love undreamt of by its object! What ignominy. School-girl's love—only a school-girl's."

And then she thought of herself a month ago, secure in her splendid loneliness, sure of her own inclinations, and that the man was not born who could make her regret the conditions upon which she held her power in the world. What did she want with lover or husband, she who had her kingdom, more than ten thousand people looking to her for their daily bread, for the comfort of their old age, and for all the pleasures of their youth? Her kingdom! That was what her father had called the iron town and its mass of

human beings. And was she to fall in love—like the typical bread-and-butter miss, the girl in her teens, the modern Juliet who meets Romeo at her first ball and loses her heart in an extra waltz, while her chaperon is at supper? The idea was monstrous, insupportable.

She returned to the room she had left in sudden restlessness, and went out on the loggia.

The storm was over, and the moon was sailing through a sea of white clouds that showed the serene and purple night above them. The tempest had passed, she thought, within and without: a few minutes of rushing rain and summer lightning, a few minutes of wild imagining, and all was calm.

"Ever since my mother's death I have wanted a friend—a friend with a mind and a heart," she told herself. "Last November I hoped my father might have become that friend. Now there is no one—no one—no one I could trust and lean upon, unless it were William Murray."

Why should friendship be impossible between a woman of six-and-twenty and a man who was considerably her senior, a man whose life was devoted to serious purposes, whose business in the world was like St. Paul's, to spend and be spent for others? With such a man friendship would be a sacred bond. Community of ideas, the same purpose in life, perfect sympathy would be enough. He would have no sentimental yearnings, no romantic fancies of the Etonian or the under-graduate. He must have passed beyond Romeo's world. He might have loved, and loved in vain, or loved and lost, ten or fifteen years ago. He could not be less than five-and-thirty; and with him the passion and the poetry of life could be only a memory.

She took up the little square volume that contained material for hard thinking, "Also Sprach Zarathustra," and she read the sage's curious analysis of woman and woman's love, love that was ever more intense for the child than for the father of the child, love which, in its most impassioned freshness, was only the prelude to maternal love; and for her *that* love,

the purest, the most enduring of human feelings, the impregnable fortress, the invincible strength, was never to be. She was not to marry, lest she should transmit to unconscious infancy the strain of a century-old madness. And for her own part she was convinced that her father had been mistaken, and that Michael's mind would never have passed the borderline if he had not been made to abandon his scheme of life, only to suffer the most crushing of all disappointments in the worthlessness of the wife he adored.

She did not believe in the hereditary strain. To her mind the resemblance in the fate of Manuela and Michael was nothing more than a coincidence.

* * * * * *

Claudia's drawing-room had a smiling aspect on the following afternoon. There were more flowers than usual on the tables, and the loggia flamed with orange and scarlet cannas from the Daneborough greenhouses, while the two fair-haired girls, Blanche and Patricia Barham, in white frocks, with roses in their gauzy hats, seemed a natural transition from the garden flowers to girlish prettiness. Claudia had sent a little note in the morning asking them to meet their preacher and the Free Friar at tea.

"I shall send you away before we begin our business talk," she said, when they had praised her for her goodness in asking them; "but I thought you would like to meet one of those good men who have banded themselves together so quietly for unobtrusive work among the poorest of the poor."

Yes, they would be enchanted to make the Friar's acquaintance; and then "it was always a happiness to meet *him*."

It was an idiosyncrasy with them that Mr. Murray should have no other designation than a pronoun.

"He has so little time for friendship," Patricia said. "Asking him to luncheon or to evening-parties is sheer waste of postage stamps. He will have no dealings with society. We have known him two years and have never broken bread with him, except at our old women's tea-party."

"When he seems to luxuriate in your little brown tea-pot," said Claudia, smiling.

"Ah! that's another story," said Blanche. "We have nothing to do with the brown tea-pot. The poor dears clubbed a penny each to buy it, and they buy the tea for every treat, an ounce of the very most expensive tea they can get. They had no fault to find with our tea, they said, but they wanted to feel they were doing *something* for him; and they make the tea as carefully as if it were the elixir of life; and they watch every cup he takes, to make sure that it is a good brew. Now, isn't that pathetic?"

"I believe they went in a body to buy the tea-pot," said Patricia. "The price was sixpence-halfpenny, which would have been a shock, if Mrs. Penniker hadn't produced the odd halfpenny. Think of the poor dears! Twelve pennies a day *pour tout potage!* And some of them like a glass of beer with their meals."

William Murray and the Free Friar were announced as the clock chimed the half hour, and Claudia gave them smiling welcome. The presence of Blanche and Patricia brought a touch of frivolity into the little party that made everything easy.

Never had girlish chatter been so welcome to Claudia. The two girls did almost all the talking, and monopolised *him*, while she poured out tea and made friends with the Friar, the man who had known and loved her brother. They talked with lowered voices, and they were immediately upon confidential terms. Michael's name was a bond of union.

James Lanford was a thin slip of a man, shabbily clad in a grey tweed suit that had seen much service. He had a countenance of extreme refinement, bright brown eyes, a high forehead, a sensitive mouth and a firm chin, the face of the man in whom spirit has always been stronger than flesh. He was a man of the people, a school-board scholar, who had taken a good degree at Oxford, helped by the vicar of his parish, and had left the University, to begin a difficult life, in the same year that Michael Rayner turned his back upon Christ Church. But in Lanford's case the

last term had been kept, and a creditable degree achieved.

"I had been through the medical school, and when I left the 'Varsity it was with the intention of becoming a doctor," he told Claudia. "My mother's friends, the kind people who had helped me at Oxford, were ready to help me while I was working at a hospital, until I could earn my living as an assistant to a doctor. It was two years after I left Oxford that your brother found me, at my medical work. He had always been kind to me, and I had seen something of him and his Christ Church friends, and I knew their views. My mother was no more, and I had no one dependent on me, no one left for me to love or work for, so he had not much trouble in persuading me to cast in my lot with the Free Friars; and from that hour my life was settled. Your brother, and half a dozen other rich men, provided the funds for our work, and maintenance for those of us who had no means of our own. I could give them nothing but my labour."

And then, while the two girls took *him* into the loggia to show him the view of the empty Park, Lanford told Claudia the scheme of this little company who had taken the Saint of Assisi for their model.

"We are only a handful of workers, not yet fifty of us, and we go about helping the utterly forlorn—the offscouring, the neglected and forsaken of men, those who seem forgotten even by God, the last of the last, the lowest of the low, the most unhappy of the unhappy. We do not pretend to amuse the poor, or to teach them, or to give them clubs or convalescent homes. We have no settlement, no shelters. Not a penny of our means has ever been spent on bricks and mortar. We find that in the cases we have to help, money in hand is the first and last necessity. We are a travelling brotherhood, and we go where we are wanted. Dire distress is the only claim upon our services. We go anywhere and everywhere. Nationality makes no difference. Colour makes no difference. I was in India all last winter. It was a plague winter, one of the worst. I had worked hard at an East-end hospital while I was assistant to a slum

doctor, and I had made a special study of those two Oriental scourges, cholera and plague; so I was able to be of some use, though it is difficult to do much where one has to fight against a profound indifference to life, and an apathy that scorns all preventive measures, even of the easiest kind. All I could do was to tramp from village to village and make friends with the sufferers, and make what cures I could."

"You do not look strong enough for such work as that."

"I have never been a strong man, but I can walk farther and live upon less than some athletes I have known."

"How am I to help you?" asked Claudia. "I want to help you to the fullest extent of my means, for my brother's sake. But you have no head-quarters, no hospitals, no home for old age, no day-nurseries for poor women's children."

"We have nothing but our brain and will and thews and sinews, and what money we can collect among us. We made up our minds in the beginning of things that we should do best by making use of existing charities, and contributing to their funds in proportion to the help they gave us. There is only one thing you can give us, Miss Rayner, and that is hard cash. We want that always, and want it greatly. We cannot put your brother's name on some magnificent pile of brick and stone, but if you give us money there is not one shilling so given that will not minister in its degree to some of the hardest needs of mankind."

"You shall have money. What does a stone tablet matter? You shall have money for cases of dire distress. I shall not forget those two words—dire distress."

"The words mean more than you can imagine, Miss Rayner. There is distress in this world that can only be realised by those whose eyes look upon it. No words can paint the nethermost depths."

Blanche and Patricia reappeared with their preacher.

"He thinks your view quite too lovely," said Patricia.

"I believe he has been thinking what a delightful convalescent home the White House would make," said Blanche, "with the loggia for open-air cures."

"No, Lady Blanche, I am not a Free Friar, or a follower of the Buddha. I think a good woman who is kind to the poor has a right to live in a beautiful house."

"That's so large-minded of him," exclaimed Patricia, to the company generally. "He is not a Savonarola. He doesn't want us to burn our pretty clothes."

"I would rather have been Erasmus than Savonarola," said Murray, whereupon his girlish worshippers wanted to know about Erasmus, with whose parents they had become acquainted in "The Cloister and the Hearth," while their knowledge of the saintly Florentine was derived mostly from the pages of "Romola."

The two girls departed discreetly after tea.

"It is good-bye for ages," Blanche said, almost in tears. "We are going to the north to-morrow, first Durham and then Braemar, and we shall not see you till next year, I'm afraid," to Murray, who went downstairs with them.

When he came back the serious business of the meeting began. Claudia seated herself at her writing-table, and the two men took their seats opposite her. There was a delay of a few minutes while the servants carried away the tea-tables; and in that almost silent pause Claudia was observant of James Lanford, and was wondering at the perfect abstraction of his countenance, as he sat looking at the ground, thoughtful, self-absorbed. She had been observing him ever since he came into the room, deeply interested in the man who had loved her brother, and she had noticed that not once in that half-hour had those bright brown eyes looked at any of the things in that exquisite room—the pictures on the walls, each a gem of modern art, the china, the Louis Seize furniture, the perfection of fabric and colour in carpet and draperies, the innumerable prettinesses of a room devised by a man who had every theory and principle of art at the back

of his head when he went into an auction-room treasure-hunting. It was unlikely that Mr. Lanford had seen many such rooms ; yet no gleam of interest or curiosity had lighted his countenance, not once had his eyes made even a casual survey of the scene. He was obviously indifferent to the things that delight the instinct of beauty in the average man.

"Mr. Lanford tells me that all I can do for the brotherhood is to provide them with hard cash. There can be no new hospital, alms-house, club, as a memorial of my brother. That kind of thing does not come into their scheme. So that nothing remains but to give them an increase of means ; and I should like this to be in the form of an endowment. I shall have to look into my affairs carefully in order to know what money I have at command, and I shall then be ready to hand over, I hope, a considerable sum, to the treasurer of the brotherhood."

"It will be our first endowment," Lanford said in his grave, quiet voice, always without enthusiasm. "Our rich members subscribe largely to the common fund, but we have no fund that outlasts the year. If we have Mr. Micawber's shilling on the right side at our annual audit we are satisfied."

"Miss Rayner purposes to give you an income. Large or small it ought to be a help and a comfort to you."

"Yes, it will be comfortable to know that we can rely upon some money every year. As we stand now, death, misfortune, or caprice among our rich brothers, might leave us penniless. I have little fear of such a contingency. There are too many earnest good men among us ; but all changes are possible in this quick-marching century."

"Whatever capital I can spare at the present time I shall augment by a considerable subscription from my future income. I want you to arrange that, Mr. Murray, with the Friars. They can tie me down in any way they like, so that my subscription may be a certainty, a legal claim upon me."

She looked at William Murray, her lips faintly tremulous, her eyes unusually bright.

The fever of last night was still in her veins, vague excitement, an eagerness for heroic action, to do some good and difficult thing. She had to keep herself in check. She was almost tempted to say she would give these men all her income, sell her houses and their splendours, go and live in a small house at Skepton, and give half her life to suffering humanity in the hospitals and asylums that her father had built. The philanthropist's ardour is infectious. She was in a mood to be carried away by romantic impulses, and visions of the ideal life.

Murray's face was dark with thought, his eyes were lowered, and his hand was clenched and leaning heavily upon the table. Some moments passed before he spoke.

"If I am to be your adviser in this matter," he began.

"Yes, you are to be my counsellor. I look to you for advice."

"In that case, while I entirely approve of your scheme of endowment, and of your giving the Free Friars as much of your existing capital as you can comfortably spare, I would strongly advise you against any fixed obligation for the future."

"But why? My income is four times larger than my spending power."

"Your income is derived from commerce, and must be subject to fluctuation. And there is another reason. Forgive me for touching upon a delicate subject, but I have no doubt you know that the will of a man in your father's position is commented upon and remembered by the world at large. I have not forgotten the condition upon which you hold your fortune; and I think, considering that restriction, you ought on no account to pledge yourself to large gifts in the future. A day might come when you would be inclined to surrender your wealth."

He had spoken with lowered eyelids, and had not once looked at her; but now, with the last words, he raised his eyes and met her own startled gaze. Was it wonder or fear? In his dark eyes, of that profound grey that seems black, there was only thought,

or it might be sorrow ; sorrow for her burden of riches, her barren life.

"There need be no consideration of that kind," she said coldly. "I am not over fond of money, but I shall not renounce my inheritance. The things that belong to me are more precious than money. I have my people. No husband could make up to me for them."

She started up from her chair as a crimson flame swept over her face, a blush that scorched like actual fire. The shame of it was horrible. Why should she have blushed ? When he was grave and business-like, talking to her as the Leeds solicitor might have talked, what excuse could she have for strong emotion, for burning cheeks and unsteady voice ?

Mr. Lanford came to her relief.

"We shall have reason enough for lasting gratitude, if you carry out your intention with respect to an endowment, Miss Rayner," he said. "There is no occasion for you to fetter yourself with a promise as to the future."

Claudia had gone to the only closed window, and opened it, as if she were being suffocated. She came back to her place at the table while Lanford was speaking ; and now the crimson fire had paled to a tender carnation, and her eyes had a gentler look.

After this the conversation was sternly practical. Names of possible trustees were discussed ; the form of endowment, in whom vested, and so forth. James Lanford knew the history, character, and means of every member of the brotherhood, the rich and the poor.

"We meet often, and discuss all our measures, our successes and our failures. Our best work is the result of the collective wisdom of our society. We have no class distinctions. The richest of us allows himself no more maintenance money than the poorest takes from the common fund. A pound a week is our measure, and out of this we are enjoined to lay something by for an evil day."

"How can you possibly save anything out of twenty shillings a week ?" asked Claudia.

"How could we possibly teach thrift and self-

denial to the poor, in homes where a whole family has to be kept for less than a pound, if we could not save at least two shillings out of our twenty."

"But your lodgings?"

"They are not allowed to cost much. One room in any street, and any kind of room, provided it is clean, and has a window that will open to the sky."

"And your clothes?"

"We have to scrape them out of our surplus. I put by eighteenpence a week for my tailor, two shillings for my post-office savings-book. But if I were desperately ill and helpless the brotherhood would look after me. I have no cares."

"Only constant deprivations."

"They are not deprivations in my case. I am too busy to miss things that other people care for."

"Ah, that was my brother's ideal life. I don't wonder that you loved each other."

There was no more to be done. Murray had written the names of the proposed trustees, and all particulars of the scheme and manner of working of the Free Friars, and this document he handed to Claudia.

"It will be best for you to write to one of those gentlemen, and ask him to call upon you, after you have consulted your solicitor, and made up your mind about what you wish to do," he said gravely, as he rose to take leave.

His manner seemed to her needlessly business-like, and lacking in sympathy. She did not want to be praised for what she was going to do. What merit can the rich claim for giving away superfluous thousands? But she would have liked him to have shown a more kindly interest, if it were only for the sake of those unknown sufferers whose woes might be lessened by her means.

He was paler than usual, worn out, perhaps, by a long morning spent in house-to-house visiting, seeing dreadful sights, hearing horrible stories of want and misery and sin.

His leave-taking was brief and cold, and she turned from him to Lanford almost as if in appeal to a friend.

"You will come and see me again?" she said. "I hope you will. It does me good to hear you talk about my brother. It does me good to talk to someone who knew him better than ever I did."

Lanford told her that he would certainly come again, though his time was over full.

"London is such a monstrous place," he said. "Half my days are wasted in tram-cars and omnibuses."

When she had rung the bell and the two men were near the door, she said suddenly:

"I suppose this is our good-bye, Mr. Murray, and that I shall not see you again before you go to Scotland?"

"Not unless you want me for the Free Friars business."

"I should like to see you when details have been settled. I want your final advice."

"In that case you can command me, till the end of next week. I must leave London on Saturday evening."

"If you can spare half an hour on Saturday afternoon."

"Certainly. I will come at three o'clock, if that will suit you."

CHAPTER XVI.

Claudia did not go again to the great church near Bow, to hear the mission preacher. She would have liked to hear him again ; and on each evening as the golden light on the loggia reminded her that at this hour he would be talking to the people, she had a sick longing to be sitting among the shabby gowns and bonnets, listening to the voice that was not like other voices, or looking up at the face that seemed splendid in the intensity of feeling. How much better to be there among the squalid flock, rather than sitting idly here, trying to pin her thoughts to a book that had ceased to interest her. The savour had gone out of all her books of late, all but her Shakespeare. To Shakespeare she had returned with a new ardour, stimulated by Murray's enthusiasm. But although she read Shakespeare on Murray's advice, she was out of touch with the preacher. Both his speech and his manner on that last afternoon had wounded her pride, and had awakened something like resentment. She was angry with him for having suggested the possibility of her renouncing her fortune for the sake of a husband. There was something vulgar in the idea.

"As if I were a housemaid," she thought, "and must naturally look to being married as the ultimate purpose of my life."

And then his silence had been as offensive as the things he had said. She would not wrong him so much as to think that he was jealous of the Free Friars ; but she was deeply wounded by his coldness. Just when she had schooled herself to believe that she

cared for him only as a friend and counsellor, and when she most wanted to be sure of his friendship, his frank, kindly regard, without one hidden or constraining thought, he had shown himself cold and unsympathetic, and seemed almost to have lost interest in the scheme that was so near her heart, her atonement for the things she had left undone while her brother lived. Was it a small thing that she wanted to atone to the dead? Was it not rather the greatest thing that had ever come into her life—her conviction of sin, and her desire to make a worthy repentance?

"Not for the world would I flatter him by going to hear him again," she thought; and then, till the western sky changed from rose to grey, she sat in the loggia, taking up book after book from the revolving table, and finding interest in none.

Ruskin was prosy, Lamb was dull, Tennyson was vapid, Browning obscure; but she ended by reading "Christmas Eve," smiling at the picture of the chapel and its frowzy congregation, awed by the vision of the dreamer.

The following days were full of business. She had interviews with Mr. Bousfield, who interrupted his cure at Harrogate to attend to her wishes. She had interviews with the Friars who were to be trustees, men of position, one a nobleman; and she had Lanford with her nearly every day, full of enthusiasm, a delightful companion, never tired of talking to her of the old Oxford days when he and Michael had been friends, or of their experiences together in that uncompleted year of Michael's novitiate.

"I never blamed him for going back to the world," he told her; "for I knew why he did it—and how much the sacrifice cost him."

No word was said of the unfortunate marriage, or the tragic death. Those things did not bear to be spoken of.

"Mr. Murray has not been as kind or as sympathetic as I hoped," she said, when she was alone with Lanford.

It was the first time she had spoken of him, and

she had meant not to speak, but the inclination was irresistible.

Lanford made excuses for him. He was overworked in his mission, doing more than one man in a hundred would or could do.

"If you knew the trouble he took to hunt me out the other day, you would not think him unsympathetic," he said; and then he expatiated upon Murray's character and career, as he had heard of it since they had become friends. He did not even use the word "acquaintance," but took friendship for granted.

"He took a splendid degree at Trinity College, Dublin, after having been a student at Aberdeen. He might have made a name in literature, if he had not gone into the Church."

"He told me that his grandfather was a weaver."

"That's true; but his father emancipated himself from the wage-earning class. He was a tutor at the University of Aberdeen, and a fine classical scholar."

It pleased Claudia to hear of refinement and distinction in the father of the man she had chosen for her friend, even if that dream of friendship was to prove a delusion. She was glad to know that the man she *could* have liked was the son of a scholar rather than of a working man; which would show that, in spite of her love for her people at Skepton, class-distinctions had still some significance for Lord Altrincham's grand-daughter.

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Before Friday evening everything was settled. Claudia had transferred seventy thousand pounds' worth of railway debentures to the trustees of the Free Friars, the income to be dealt with by the brotherhood without condition or even suggestion on Claudia's part.

"Pray don't praise me," she said, when the founder of the society spoke of her munificence. "There can be no merit in giving you money I don't want. I should be making a greater sacrifice if I gave you one of the pictures in this room, for I should miss that.

I hope to do a good deal more for my brother's friends by and by."

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And now Saturday had come, the end of a week that had seemed interminable, and Claudia was roaming up and down the gallery, looking at the flowers, a wagon-load that had come from Daneborough, a snorting smoke-diffusing steam-wagon that everybody on the road abhorred. It was nearly three o'clock, and no doubt Murray would be punctual. She hardly knew what she was going to say to him, for, everything being settled, deeds signed, trustees appointed, there would seem no pretence for asking counsel or guidance of any kind. They could have nothing to say to each other except good-bye.

And if he said good-bye, without any word of meeting in the future, it would mean that her dream of friendship was indeed the most fugitive of day-dreams. If after the confidence that she had reposed in him—for the things she had said to him about her treatment of her brother had been almost of the nature of a confession—he could let her go without one word of real friendship, without one expression of solicitude for her future happiness, for her peace of mind in the present, why, then, indeed, he must be incapable of friendship.

"I have said so much to him, oh, so much too much," she thought, as she walked slowly up and down, as if in time to the clock that ticked her world-weariness, with its perpetual "Sick, sick, sick! Death, death, death! Sick to death!" "I have made such an appeal to his compassion, have even told him that I wanted a friend. If he can take my hand and say good-bye, and walk out of this house never wanting to see me again, he must have a heart of stone."

Signor Delfino had called in the morning, and had almost insisted upon seeing Miss Rayner. London was a veritable desert. If he had to wait much longer he would prefer to wait in Paris. He could meet madame and her attendants at Calais; but pro-

tracted idleness in London would drive him to suicide.

On this Claudia informed him that she had altered her plans, and would not travel till the following spring, unless, indeed, she should change her mind again and go to Egypt and on to Khartoum, in the winter. But in the meantime, she begged Signor Delfino to consider what would be a proper compensation for the breaking of his engagement, and a cheque for the amount should be sent him.

"I daresay you will have no difficulty in finding another engagement," she said.

"Nobile Signorina, so far from difficulty, I have been persecuted by great ladies who would give the eyes of their head to secure me for their courier. I can place myself with a duchess this afternoon, and on Monday I shall have her family in my charge for a motor tour in the Balkans."

"Where you are a Turk, I suppose?"

"Pardon, Signorina, a Roumanian."

* * * * * *

"I shall not leave England this year, Mary—or, at least, not till the cold weather. I shall spend the autumn at Daneborough with my dogs," she told her faithful maid an hour afterwards.

"My word, Miss Claudia, if I wasn't nearer sixty than fifty I could jump for joy; but that little French fool, Félicité has been in hysterics. Didn't I douse her with cold water?"

"Why hysterics?"

"Ever since Signor Dulfinian told her he wasn't going to travel with us. She's over head and ears in love with him."

"What an idiot! And I don't suppose he has said half a dozen civil words to her."

Mary shook her head sagely.

"I saw him chuck her under the chin the last time he came. She pretended to be angry, and then he laughed and called her 'beller, beller.' But that's about all."

"Not much to account for hysterics, Mary. What fools women are!"

Fools, assuredly, or would Miss Rayner have taken the trouble to change the white cashmere gown she had worn all the morning for a newer and prettier one in order to say good-bye to a missionary preacher, who might be supposed to know no difference between the crudest orange-coloured calico that Manchester manufactures for savage Africa, and the most exquisite confection from Dover Street or Hanover Square?

Yet she stood with admirable patience while Mary, whose fingers were not so deft as Félicité's, fumbled with, and finally fastened, about a hundred hooks and eyes, and then was childishly glad when the good soul exclaimed:

"That's the prettiest gown you've had since you went into mourning."

The clocks had struck about three minutes when the butler announced Mr. Murray.

She was receiving him in the gallery to-day, among splendours he had never seen—the Mortlake tapestry, the famous boule cabinets, filled with old Sèvres, the choicest of her father's pictures, and all the uncountable trifles of bric-à-brac from which might have been made a history of trivial art since the reign of Charlemagne.

If she had any idea of surprising or dazzling him, or of enhancing her own importance by this environment, she was disappointed. He looked straight before him, with exceeding gravity, and seated himself in the chair she indicated after she had taken her seat among a heap of cushions in the corner of an immense sofa.

She would have liked him to look about the room and to express admiration, or, at least, curiosity, for then they could have talked about the pictures or the tapestry. As it was, he seemed to have nothing to say to her, to sit there waiting for her to state her business, as if he had been a solicitor, or a doctor.

She looked at him furtively, afraid to be surprised by his glance, but he did not see her. His brooding eyes seemed to hold something she could never know,

the mystery of a mind beyond her reach, nothing false, or crafty, or underhand ; only a depth below her plummet line.

She had to begin her story, telling him in the dryest words how the Free Friar endowment had been settled. He listened and approved.

"I don't think you will ever regret the money," he said ; "no, not if you were to be poor to-morrow."

"Regret ! You know I wanted to do much more, only you would not let me."

"Please don't put it in that way. I gave you the advice that any man of the world would have given you."

"Strange that a missionary should be a man of the world," she said, with a touch of impertinence. "It seems a curious mixture."

"If more of us had been men of the world there would be less prejudice against missionaries."

After this, she questioned him about his work in Edinburgh, and after. She forced him to talk about himself. He was reluctant, and very grave. She spoke of his father, of whose scholarship Lanford had told her ; but even a subject so intimate could not break down his reserve.

After that she began to talk of his African mission.

"You will go back," she said, assuming a vivacious air. "The Dark Continent will exercise her spell. She is like Cleopatra—irresistible for the men who love her. I know you will go back."

"Then you know me better than I know myself," he said, "for at present I have no idea of going back to my old work, though I have friends who are working there, and who would like me to help them. There is so much to do here—so much to do and so little done. But if I find my work among the white-skins hopeless, and feel that I am making no headway, I may go back."

"And you will be happy there ?"

"I was very happy, in spite of many disappointments. The net result was good."

The clocks chimed the half-hour, and he rose at the sound. "Good-bye," he said, as she stood up and gave him her hand.

For the moment she was speechless, and she knew that she was trembling, and hated herself for that sign of an unconquerable agitation. She could not command her emotions, she who had thought herself so strong. She could not let him go out of her life for ever without a word, could not steel her heart against the agony of such a parting. Self-respect, pride, womanly dignity, were flung to the winds.

"Is good-bye to be for ever?" she asked.

"We are not very likely to meet again. Our paths are wide apart."

"I have no path in life. I have lost my way in a wilderness. I have nothing to live for, nothing, except perhaps my good people in Yorkshire."

"Is not that enough?" he asked, with a grave smile. "From what you have told me about them and your regard for them, Skepton must be a source of unfailing interest for you—a little world, and all your own."

"Yes; I have been too proud of it," she said. "I am proud of it. But I want something more." She had recovered her self-possession by this time, and her speech was grave and calm, almost like his. "I want a friend—a friend with a mind stronger and better than my own; and I almost thought you were going to be my friend."

"That is impossible," he said, moving towards the door.

"Why impossible?"

"Good-bye."

He was nearer the door now, and evidently did not mean to answer her question.

Then all a woman's wilfulness, blind impulse, passionate self-assertion, rose up in her, and she hurried after him, and stood facing him, almost barring the way.

"You shall not go till you have answered my question. Why cannot you be my friend?"

"I think you must know why."

"No, no, no. I know nothing. Your mind is an unfathomable depth. I have never been to the bottom of it. You have made yourself a mystery to

me. I have poured out all the secrets of my heart to you, and you have told me nothing."

"And you don't know why I have held myself in check?"

"No."

"Because I love you with all my heart and soul, and because love is impossible between you and me."

The flush of passionate feeling faded in an instant and left her deadly white. He thought she was going to faint, and stretched out his arms instinctively to save her from falling, and the next moment her head was lying on his shoulder, and he could feel the wild beating of her heart against his own.

"Oh, my love! my love! my love!" she said, "how blessed it is to be loved!"

He led her gently back to the sofa where she had been sitting, and let her sink into her corner among the silken pillows, and then he seated himself by her side, and spoke to her gently, seriously, holding her hand in his.

"Claudia, you know that there is madness in all talk of love between you and me—unless——"

"Unless what, William?"

He had spoken her name for the first time, and now she must speak his name, the plain, humdrum, old-fashioned English name. Once in her unceasing thoughts of him she had scribbled on a sheet of paper, William Shakespeare, William of Nassau, William Pitt, William Cowper, William Wordsworth, and a long list of great men who had borne the name that had become the world's one name for her.

"Unless you were willing to give up everything that makes your life exceptional—that makes you a queen among women. Your ironworks, your fine houses, and the monstrous power that goes with monstrous wealth. I don't think you would like to surrender all those things, to be an itinerant parson's wife. Even if you were willing, on the impulse of a sudden regard for a man of whom you know so little, I would not consent to such a sacrifice."

She was silent. He bent down and kissed the delicate hand, and let it go.

"No," she said, "I will never give up Skepton. My father's will was absurd, made when he was half-distracted by grief. If he had given himself time to think he would never have tried to put my life in chains. No, I will never let my Uncle Mathew rob me of the things I care for. He is a rich man; he has more money than he can spend, he has told me so. His sons are my partners. His daughters are provided for by my father. They shall not rob me of the means of doing the great work I shall be able to do —with your help, when I am your wife, working with you, spending my fortune for the good of mankind."

"If you want to keep your fortune you cannot be my wife. Your father's will is explicit. It was published in the newspapers—again and again. You forfeit everything, except an annuity, if you marry."

"Why should people know of my marriage? We could keep our secret. I think it would seem a sweeter bond if no one knew. To be your wife, to know that you loved me, and that with you I was only a woman, taking the lower place, loving you and looking up to you, humble and submissive—while to the world I might still be Miss Rayner, proud and cold and solitary, an enigma to the people who call themselves my friends."

"That kind of position would be romantic, no doubt, and even dramatic," he said, with a sudden coldness in his voice; "but there is one insuperable objection."

"What objection?"

"I would sooner blow out my brains than be your husband on such terms."

"You are too proud."

"I am at least honest. Such a marriage would be despicable—a contemptible fraud."

"But I tell you my uncle does not want my fortune. It would do him no good. It would be a burden to him."

"Not such a burden as it would be to you if you kept it by fraud. Good-bye, Claudia. You see I was right. There is nothing for you and me except a long good-bye."

She held his hand, she would not let him rise till she

had said all she wanted to say—a stream of impassioned argument, vehement, illogical. Why should not they hold by her millions, they who could employ them only for good? It was not this fine house she cared for—not Daneborough—nor a life of sybarite ease; but she wanted to keep the money which meant almost illimitable means of doing good. If the money went to Mathew Rayner, a hard-headed business man, it would be spent in trade, and not in philanthropy. The outcasts, the offscouring, the savage races on the Dark Continent, would never be the better for it. While if it were hers, hers and her husband's, it might be a source of good to thousands. For her own part, she cared nothing for the luxuries and splendours of the world, fine houses, troops of servants, expensive clothes. She could live as the Puritans lived, the exiles of the *Mayflower;* she could live in a thatched hut in Central Africa; but she could not give up the power of doing a great work for the weak and the oppressed, for realising the dreams of her missionary, her apostle.

"I only care for my money because it can do that," she said. "Your plans, your dreams, your longings to serve your fellow men."

"My dear, dear girl," he said very gently, "I love you even for your unreasonableness, because you do not understand the dishonesty of your arguments. You see, my dearest, my own conviction, after we had talked together as friends, was well founded from the first. This great fortune of yours is the most important factor in your life. You are proud of the power it gives you, the power to do great and good things. For you money means power—power to be used generously, power to make others happy—and that power is very dear to you. Knowing this, I told myself from the beginning, from the hour I let myself love you, that we could never be more to each other than friends, and that loving you as I did we must be friends at a distance. And I meant to keep my secret."

"But if I confess that I love you, love you as I never thought it was in my nature to love?"

"It can make no difference, for there is still something you love better. Even if you were willing to give up your fortune, I would not let you do it. I would not take you on those terms, for I am very sure the day would come when you would be sorry for your surrender, and would hate yourself—perhaps hate me—for the impulse of an impassioned hour. You are too highly strung to be always wise, Claudia. You must let me be wise for you. Believe me, there is no word for us but good-bye."

"I will not say that word," she cried passionately. She turned from him with an impetuous movement, and threw herself into the corner of the sofa, hiding her face among the cushions, hating that he should see her tears, the tears that fell hot and fast, tears of anger, wounded pride, self-will.

Even with her face and head half buried in a down pillow, she was listening for his next words—words of consolation, or surrender. Would he kneel by the sofa, and try to raise her head from its unnatural position? What tender and loving thing would he do, he who loved her and had told his love, in his own despite, true love being stronger than the will of strongest man? What would he do?

Already the blood was surging in her head; her temples were throbbing, her heart was beating fiercely.

"No voice came; no kindly hand touched her; footsteps were noiseless on the soft Indian carpet; there was no sound but the opening and closing of a door.

She started up angrily, dashed the tears from her eyes, and looked round the empty room. He had left her cruelly, heartlessly. He was a monster of unkindness and egotism.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE mission preacher's Edinburgh lodgings were in one of the older streets of the new town, a street sacred to the memory of Walter Scott. Mr. Murray had found rooms more spacious than he required in a house at the lower end of Castle Street, a house with many rooms on each floor.

His landlady was of the true Scotch type, the old-fashioned landlady, kindly and loquacious, if encouraged, honourable and honest, seeking no illegitimate profits, but exacting a sufficient price for her goods.

It was on the last evening of William Murray's mission that this worthy matron was surprised by the arrival of a visitor between nine and ten o'clock, just when she, Mrs. Butler, was preparing to retire to her enclosed bed in a basement room, which served her as a parlour by day and bedroom by night.

The visitor was a lady, tall and of distinguished appearance, but plainly dressed in black, and wearing a hat which shadowed the upper part of her face. Mrs. Butler noted that the mouth was beautiful, the chin firm and round.

"Is Mr. Murray at home?"

"No, ma'am. He is preaching at Linlithgow the night, and cannot be home much before eleven."

"Did he leave any message for me?"

Mrs. Butler stared in frank surprise. Mr. Murray had left no message, had expected no visitor.

"No visitor, perhaps; but he must have expected me, unless my letter has been delayed. I told him to expect me this evening."

"Indeed, ma'am. Might you be a relation of Mr. Murray?"

"He ought to have told you all about me. I am his wife."

Mrs. Butler almost fell into the nearest chair.

"Indeed, ma'am, you've taken my breath away. I didn't know the gentleman was married. Not one word did he say of expecting his good lady when he took my rooms. But they're not rooms that any lady need find fault with, thank God."

"We have not been married long, and it had not been decided that I was to join him in Edinburgh. In fact, I only made up my mind about coming last night, and I suppose my letter was posted too late."

"It must have been, ma'am, for not one word did Mr. Murray say before he left for Linlithgow. But he's been awful hard-worked, and was preaching this afternoon up to five o'clock, with only just time to snatch a morsel of cold meat with his tea before he went off to the train. Please come this way, ma'am. Mr. Murray has my back rooms. They're very convenient, though the look-out is not so good as the front."

The landlady led the way along a passage and up a short flight of steps to a sitting-room, plainly furnished, but comfortable. Here she turned up the gas, and opened a door leading into a good-sized bedroom, through which she led the unexpected visitor into a third room, also of fair size, which was sometimes let as a second bedroom, but which Mr. Murray had not used.

This suite of rooms had been built out at the back of the house, when Castle Street was the most fashionable street in Edinburgh, Mrs. Butler explained, and had certainly nothing to boast of in the way of view, as the windows all looked into a walled yard like a dry well.

Mrs. Butler enquired about Mrs. Murray's luggage. It had been left at the station, and could be sent for in the morning. She begged to be allowed to prepare some refreshment. Her kitchen fire was burning,

and she could make some tea in a few minutes. She was sure that Mrs. Murray must want at least a cup of tea and a wee bit bread and butter, after a tiring journey from the South.

Mrs. Murray wanted nothing. Mrs. Butler had informed her that Mr. Murray had a latch-key, and was to let himself in when he came from the station. A soda-water syphon and a plate of biscuits had been put ready for him. He would want nothing more. Never was there a gentleman who gave less trouble! And such a preacher! All Edinburgh had been thronging to hear him.

Mrs. Murray begged the obliging landlady to go to bed. She wanted nothing but rest. She could take a nap in the comfortable armchair while waiting for her husband's return.

"And to think of your being his wife! You must be very proud of him, ma'am."

"I am very proud of him," said Claudia, taking off her hat.

"And he must be very proud of you, ma'am," said the landlady, impressed by the beautiful face suddenly revealed in the full glare of a fierce gas-burner.

When she was gone Claudia looked at her watch. A quarter-past ten. There was plenty of time for her to make a tour of inspection before he came home. Home! What a mockery the word seemed. Was he never to have any better home than this, the lodging of a few weeks? First in one grim, overpopulated town, and then in another. A wanderer over the face of the earth, spending himself for others, solitary, never tended by loving hands, never waited for by an anxious heart.

No; he should not always be solitary. She meant to be the companion of his life. Nature and Fate and God had marked her for his helpmate. All the years of her life that had gone before counted as nothing against these few weeks in which she had loved him. And love had been mutual. She had seen the lovelight in his face that afternoon in the old women's parlour. He had been off his guard in the surprise of her presence there, and that one flash

of joy had told her that she was beloved. Only love can bring that light into the eyes of a man, just as there are tones in a man's voice that only love can awaken. She knew that he loved her. She had not given her love unsought. She knew : and she would not let him go out of her life, loving her, and hiding his love. That knowledge had made her bold. She had talked to him of herself and of her own feelings as she had never talked to living creature since her mother's death. And now she was doing the most daring, the most desperate thing that a woman could do, scarcely conscious that there was immodesty in her action. Great love has depths in which all the conventionalities of this world, all the restraints of womanly pride, and all the bonds and fetters of reason, vanish out of sight.

Claudia walked about the sitting-room, looking at the place in which he lived, his books, his large leather writing-case, worn with much usage and much travel, the sheet of foolscap upon which he had been writing, the page half filled, the pen thrown across it, books heaped on either side, books, like the desk, worn with long use ; one volume only was new, a German savant's monograph on the fourth gospel. On a table by the window she found his poets—two odd volumes of Johnson's "Shakespeare," in old calf, with a name written on the fly-leaf of each book : "Alexander Murray, Marischal College, Aberdeen, 1847." Crabbe, Pope, popular editions ; "In Memoriam," a volume of Browning, and an odd volume of Dryden, containing the "Hind and Panther." All the books showed signs of studious reading, passages underscored, and numerous marginal notes in a minute pencil writing.

She kissed one of those annotated pages in a sudden impulse of overmastering love. She conjured up the vision of his African hut, and of him sitting alone "in the dead vast and middle of the night," reading *Hamlet* or *Lear*, his soul carried far away from the wilderness and the black faces, happy in his isolation, alone among savages half tamed and dangerous.

And then she pictured him sitting alone in this

sombre lodging-house parlour, unbeautiful as the hut in the desert.

What a grim-looking room, to eyes accustomed to things of price and artistic merit! Faded crimson curtains pushed back from the window, with its view of stone walls glimmering in the moonlight. A square table, with a tartan cover, a horsehair sofa, and ponderous mahogany chairs severely discomfortable, one high-backed armchair for the only luxury. Dark engravings glowering from a drab wall-paper, and a triple gas-lamp that made one shudder.

She was listening with all her might while she looked at these things, lest he should open the distant hall-door unheard and surprise her. Before coming to the house she had made up her mind to remain there in hiding all night, if it were possible, so that she could say to him in the morning, "I called myself your wife, and stayed under the same roof with you, and now you will have to marry me."

She had pleased herself with the idea of saying those words. There should be no more tragedy between them, only comedy. What need was there of tragedy, when they loved each other? A wilful man, a wilful woman, holding each other at arm's length, but both longing to be made one! She would look in his face with a smile, put her hands lightly on his shoulders, and say, "You will have to marry me."

And then in the most out-of-the-way church in this great city, they would be married, in the early morning, and no one need ever know of the bond between them.

Up to this point all the accidents had favoured her scheme. She had arrived in Edinburgh that morning with old Mary for her sole companion, and had gone to a small second-rate hotel in a street off the Corstorphine Road. She had made enquiries of the landlord's wife, a Presbyterian, but a broad-minded woman, who had been to hear the mission preacher at the Episcopalian Church where he preached; indeed, she told Claudia that half Presbyterian Edinburgh had been to hear him. From this source Claudia discovered that Murray was to preach at Linlithgow that evening, and she was therefore safe in going

to his lodgings before ten o'clock. This was the first bit of good luck; the second was in finding an unsuspicious and evidently sleepy landlady, and the next in the plan of the lodgings with the unused third room, where she might be in safe hiding till morning. She had seen the honest Scotch body unlock the door of this third room, and had made up her mind that it would be easy to remove the key to the inner side, and highly improbable that Murray would notice its disappearance.

He would come home worn out with the exhausting service and the railway journey, and was it likely he would look at the door of that inner room, a door in the shadow of a ponderous oak wardrobe?

She looked at her watch—half-past ten, time for retreat. Every moment now was a moment of danger. She turned down the gas-burner to the microscopic blue point she had noted when Mrs. Butler ushered her into the room, and then she went through the bedroom where there was another thrifty gleam, and where she took the key out of the lock before she passed into the third room. The door locked she was safe. Here there was not even the blue spark, and she knew that she must live through the night in darkness, not without shuddering suspicions of mice behind the old wainscote, or great fat white moths lying perdu in the window curtains.

A light might betray her. Not for worlds would she have him discover her before the following morning. She had given Mary the address, telling her that she was to spend this one night with a friend, and Mary was to come at nine o'clock and help her to dress.

"My friend is in rather humble lodgings, and has no bedroom for you," she explained.

She meant to tell Mary everything. She had perfect confidence in Mary's honour and fidelity.

"If I were going to murder anybody I should ask Mary to help me," she thought, smiling as she watched her old servant's puzzled countenance, so anxious, so kind. She knew that poor old Mary had been in a state of hopeless bewilderment since yesterday afternoon, when she had been suddenly ordered to pack

and be ready to start for Edinburgh by the night express.

"I never heard tell that you knew a mortal soul in Edinburgh, Miss Claudia," she had said; "but, of course, I'm very pleased to go with you."

Félicité had been given a month's holiday across the Channel, to console her for the loss of foreign travel in Signor Delfino's company. There was no one at the White House who had a right to wonder, except Mary; and Mary wondered exceedingly, wondering at the plain black gown she had to exhume for the journey; wondering at her mistress choosing to go without a footman, she who never travelled unattended, wondering still more at the small second-rate hotel in the dull new street, wondering most of all at her mistress's going off alone in a cab at nine o'clock in the evening.

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It was some minutes after Claudia had heard a church clock strike eleven when there came the sound of footsteps in the outer room, the slow footsteps of a weary man. She could hear every sound in the stillness of those back premises. She could hear him pacing slowly to and fro for a long time, and then there was the sound of a heavy chair drawn across the floor, and after that the rustling of papers moved about, the fall of a book, and then even the scratching of a pen was audible to those strained ears. She had left the bedroom door open, and the gas light in the sitting-room sent vivid rays under her door. Oh, what a friendly golden light it seemed, and how much better than the pallid brightness of the moon shining through the unshaded window and making every piece of furniture a spectral horror. She sat near the door, listening to the rapid pen, to the rustling that marked the turning of a page, and more than once to a long, deep sigh, as of a man tired to death, or sad as death.

She heard the clock strike the quarters—twelve o'clock, a quarter-past, half-past, and the sound of the pen was still going on. There had been intervals. He had paced the room again—now slowly—now faster.

She had heard him open the window to its widest, and had known that he was looking up at the moonlit sky. She sat on her uncomfortable little cane chair, with her head resting against the door, afraid to stir, almost afraid to breathe, and she suffered the usual agonies of a forced immovableness, until every joint became a thing of pain.

She had not been able to sleep half an hour at a time on the night journey, and she had not even tried to rest since her arrival in Edinburgh. Sleep was impossible while her brain was on fire with her desperate resolve, so she had ordered an open fly and had given her faithful maid a treat. They had gone to Roslyn Chapel, and to Craigmillar Castle, and Claudia had got through the day somehow—a day that had seemed made up of strange alternations between hours that crawled and hours that galloped, as her impatience or her apprehension prevailed.

And now, sitting on that miserable little cane chair, suffering martyrdom in every limb, sleep came upon her, sleep that will not be denied, overpowering, irresistible. Her head sank upon her breast, her grip upon the back of the chair relaxed. She was going to fall upon the floor, when she pulled herself together with an effort, slipped her feet out of the high-heeled shoes, and crept stealthily to the bed, the ghostly white bed that the moonlight made so like the bed of death.

Mrs. Butler's spring mattress had seen service, and the "over-lay" was not much better than flock; but to Claudia's aching head and tortured limbs the couch was soft as heaped Elysian flowers. She sank down and down and down into an abyss of sleep, and did not lift her head from the flock pillow till the warm sunlight stole under the dark lashes and she opened her dazzled eyes and knew that it was morning.

It was morning, and she had won. She had slept under the same roof with him, his avowed wife. He would have to marry her.

She looked at her watch. A quarter to seven. No sound from the next room. He was up and had

gone about his business perhaps. She had been told of his early habits at the old women's tea-party; how he used to look in upon the wage-earners before they started on their day's work, and how he would sometimes see the children at their breakfast, or no breakfast, before they went to school.

She listened for some minutes, and then ventured to unlock the door, and open it a little way. The door leading to the sitting-room was ajar, and she could hear him walking about. The morning air blew in through wide-open windows, heavenly fresh upon her fevered face. She stood in the inner doorway trembling, her heart beating at racing pace, her knees almost giving way under her; and then, with a desperate courage, she rushed through the bedroom and pushed the door open, and stood before the man who loved her, strange and almost dreadful in the wonder of her presence there.

"Claudia," he said.

"Yes. Did you think it was my ghost? Did you think you were dreaming?"

His face had whitened as if with fear at the sudden apparition, but it flushed now with ineffable, invincible, overwhelming love, love not to be repressed or held in check by any power of manly fortitude or manly will. Taken by surprise like this, all the force and passion of the man broke out unmasked and uncontrolled.

He caught her in his arms, but not as he had done on the threshold of her drawing-room when he thought she was swooning. Then he had refrained from any mark of feeling. Now in this marvellous conjuncture all was forgotten except love. It was her lover against whose heart her heart was beating, her lover whose lips sought hers, and would not be denied. Innocent even in her audacity, this passionate outbreak shocked her, and she struggled for freedom even in the rapture of knowing herself so loved.

"Claudia, how in the name of wonder did you come here?"

"I came here last night. I have been in that inner room since eleven o'clock. It was time for me to

show myself to you, for you would have been hearing about me from your landlady. I came here late in the evening, and I announced myself as your wife; and now, as I have spent the night under the same roof with you, and as your landlady believes we are married, I suppose we are husband and wife according to Scotch law. So, you see, you will have to marry me."

She looked at him with an exquisite smile, as if seeing only the comedy of the situation.

"I shall have to marry you," he repeated softly, putting his arms round her again, but with exceeding gentleness. "And you came to this place, for this? My dearest love, does this mean surrender?"

"What else can it mean? I want to be your wife, to belong to you, to work with you for the good of the world. I am six-and-twenty, and I have had a good many offers of marriage—one from a man of whom any woman might be proud; but I never cared for mortal man till I met you. I have cheated you out of your freedom, William," her voice lingered on his name, as if to speak it were a joy. "I am your wife by the Scotch law."

"Not till I acknowledge you before two competent witnesses."

"But you are not going to deny me. Your landlady or the servant maid will be here presently, I suppose; and my old servant, Mary, is to come for me at nine o'clock. Are you going to repudiate me?"

"Have you counted the cost, Claudia?" gravely, earnestly, trying to read her inmost thoughts. "Remember what I said to you in Park Lane. I told you then that if you were willing to make so great a sacrifice I would not let you do it."

"But you have no choice now," she said. "I am your wife by the law of Scotland."

Her head sank upon his shoulder, her eyes looked up at him, lovely in their clear darkness, yet with depths inscrutable, her arms were round his neck, and now it was she whose lips sought his.

"Husband," she whispered softly, as if she were pronouncing a spell.

"My beloved girl, I will not call you wife till we have been married in the House of God. For you and me there can be no lesser form of marriage."

"No, the church is best; but I wanted to be sure of you."

"Dear love, it was of yourself you had to be sure. You were at the parting of the ways. Wealth, and the power that wealth can buy, or love immeasurable. Have you chosen? Have you no fear of repenting?"

"I cannot live without you," she said, her eyelids lowered, and one tremulous hand fluttering on his breast like a white bird that had alighted there, half afraid, and half glad. "I tried it for nearly a fortnight; tried to school myself to forgetfulness; kept telling myself that there were plenty of good things in this world to live for besides William Murray; tried, and tried, and tried; reasoned with myself, scolded, hated myself for my folly. But the end of it all was pre-ordained. I could not live without you. God made us for each other, or at least He made me for you. If I had stayed away from you any longer there would have been another coroner's inquest in our family. I should have gone out of life by the tragical door—like my poor brother."

"Claudia, you must not say such things—or think them."

"Anyhow, I can't help feeling them. I tell you it was inevitable. So at last I did the desperate thing, William, and came to you on the spur of the moment. I did not give myself time to turn coward, but came off with a rush. Do you think I would have come if I had not been sure of your love. And now let me look at my husband. Oh, my dearest, how pale and haggard! what weary, weary eyes! You have been working yourself to death."

"Do you think it was easy for me to leave you, that it cost me no struggle? Claudia, I have been breaking my heart for you. I have hardly slept for an hour on end since I came here. If these walls could speak they would tell you of my long night-watches."

"I heard you last night, marching up and down."

"I had a demon of unrest. And there was the ever-

recurring question, had I been too worldly-wise? Was I doing the best for you when I left you in your splendid isolation. Might not my Miss Kilmansegg be happier without her gold? What if she should have a sick mind, a sorrowful soul, that wealth could not cure? You have answered the question. You have come to me, beloved, and the problem is solved."

* * * * * *

It was half-past seven, and a punctual Scotch lassie came with her tray, and began to lay the table for breakfast, showing no surprise at Claudia's presence, of which fact her mistress had duly informed her. She laid the table for two, and she had prepared a superior meal in honour of the pastor's wife—eggs, marmalade, Scotch cakes, and the universal Finnan haddock.

They were to breakfast together, *tête-à-tête*, man and wife. The homely table looked exquisite in Claudia's eyes, the blue-and-white crockery, the snow-white cloth, the funny old horn-handled knives and crochet d'oyleys. The sunbeams danced upon the plated teapot, danced for joy. There were no flowers on the table, nothing meant for prettiness, yet it all seemed lovely.

"You must not think I have such a luxurious meal every day," Murray said, smiling at her as she took her place before the tea-tray, blushing, embarrassed, but unspeakably glad. It was not the first time she had poured out tea for him. She recalled the *tête-à-tête* tea in Park Lane, and her sudden shyness when he came into the room and in a flash of troubled thought it occurred to her that she had done an unseemly thing in asking him to visit her.

But now she was sitting opposite him in exquisite self-abandonment. He stretched his hand across the table to clasp hers as the door closed upon the lassie. His face was radiant with a great joy.

"Is it for life, Claudia?"

"For life, and beyond. For the better life, the life of higher development that you have told us about. For ever and for ever."

After this the talk was of breakfast. Claudia

declared herself atrociously hungry, and allowed things to be put upon her plate, but ended by eating nothing; and Murray was not much more reasonable. They could only look at each other across the table and clasp hands again and again, as if to make sure that they were flesh and blood and not mirage-people, who would vanish from each other's sight like spectral cities in the desert. It was some time before either could think or talk quite rationally. But at last Murray began to consider the actualities of the case.

"I go from here to Aberdeen to-morrow," he said. "We can be married there if you like, Claudia. A marriage by proclamation will only require a fortnight's notice; but we must be married in a Presbyterian Church. My father and all his forebears were Presbyterians, and our kirk has always been dear to me, though I left it when I was a boy. I think we may very well be married by a Presbyterian minister."

"If he can tie a knot that will last."

"No fear of that."

They discussed the arrangements to be made. He would look for suitable lodgings in the granite city, where she might live quietly till they could be married.

"You will ask your uncle to come to your wedding?"

Claudia paled at the name.

"My uncle, my Philistine uncle! Not for worlds! That would take all the romance out of our marriage. It is to be sudden and secret, like Juliet's," she went on eagerly, as he sat looking at her with something of wonder, something of apprehension.

"But why secret? We are not boy and girl to mix romance with life's most serious act. You are not a Lydia Languish—a devourer of foolish novels."

"How rude to remind me that I am no longer a girl—almost an elderly spinster," she said, laughing at him, and bringing her lips nearer his, challenging his caress.

"Let me be as romantic as I like," she whispered. "It is your part to submit to my fancies. Haven't I stooped low enough to win you, flung womanly pride,

dignity, self-respect — all those abstract qualities women brag about—to the winds, only for love, pure, intense, unalterable love."

Her loosened hair was on his breast. He had no answer but a kiss, locked lips, the ecstasy of loving and being loved.

"Cleopatra," he said softly, as he raised the beautiful head and looked again into the clear darkness of her eyes. "Well, it must be as you choose. We will make no fuss, but just be married quietly at the church where I was baptised, a shabby little church in the old town where I was a student in a ragged red gown twenty years ago. And I am not much richer now, Claudia. You ought to know that."

They were standing by the wide open window, his arm still round her, his eyes upon her face, adoring, but watchful.

"What do I care how poor you are?"

"I have just enough for independence at home or in Africa."

"You are never going to Africa."

"Not unless you go with me. But you ought to know my circumstances. My father had nothing to leave me, except his reputation for a fine character and splendid scholarship. I have always been worlds away from him in that respect, a sparrow where he was an eagle. I had an aunt, the widow of a Glasgow merchant, who wanted to adopt me, after losing her only child, a boy of my own age. My people would not give me up, though there were three of us, but my aunt was always kind, and she left me house-property in Glasgow worth between three and four hundred a year. That income has made things easy for me; but for you my circumstances would mean penury, or, at best, a town or country parsonage and a homely way of life. You will have to think out the situation carefully before you come to Aberdeen."

Her eyelids were lowered, her brow was contracted in thought. She did not want to answer him with a lie, and she had her own plans, fixed and irrevocable. She meant to marry him, and she did not mean to sacrifice her fortune.

"I have no need of thought," she said in a low voice. "I made up my mind before I left London. I am going to be your wife."

The door was opened, and the lassie announced:

"A person to see Mrs. Murray."

Mary entered, pale and scared, having seen the mission-preacher's arm hastily withdrawn from her mistress's waist. She stood silent, "ready to drop," as she told Claudia afterwards.

"That's a good old Mary, always punctual," said Claudia, as the door closed on the lassie. "I am quite ready to go back to the hotel. I shall have something to tell you when we get there—something wonderful. Did you bring a cab?"

"Yes, Miss Claudia," answered Mary, hardly able to speak, and with a countenance of infinite distress.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THREE days later Claudia and her maid were established in comfortable rooms near the public park at Aberdeen, and Mary knew all that had happened in that mysterious visit to Castle Street. Mary had heard and believed, disapproving, deeply sorry, pained by the idea that her dear young lady had degraded herself by that wild adventure, and even more distressed at the thought that she was to do a dishonest thing; sympathising with her, loving her, and highly approving of the man she had chosen for her husband, but uninfluenced by specious arguments against the surrender of Ralph Rayner's millions.

Claudia tried to make Mary understand her two grand reasons for holding fast by her fortune. The first reason was that her father had been under a delusion when he put the fatal clause in his will, and that if he had lived longer and seen more of his daughter he would inevitably have cancelled that clause.

"He made his will a week after Michael's death," she told Mary. "He was hardly sane when he made it. I saw something of him in that dreadful week. He was a man distraught."

Mary acknowledged the truth of this description. She remembered the master's livid countenance in those dreadful days, his silence, a dumb despair that was more appalling than violent speech; his orders to the household, tyrannical, contradictory; his nights of roaming about the house. Yes, he had seemed like a man whose wits were in jeopardy.

"And it was then that he made his will," said Claudia.

"You ought to have disputed the will," said Mary.

"I never thought of such a thing. I did not care. I did not believe I should ever wish to marry."

And then came her second reason for keeping Skepton, and the money that would enable her to do infinite good in this sorrowful world. Her uncle did not want her fortune, had no use for it. Her cousins Theodore and Algernon were made rich by their partnership in the ironworks, and, according to their own estimate of probabilities, they would grow richer year by year.

"I am doing nobody wrong," Claudia concluded doggedly; "and now let me hear no more about it, you foolish old Mary."

Mary was not easily silenced; she was as troublesome as a tender conscience. She insisted upon putting before Claudia the inconvenience of a secret marriage, the ifs and buts, the probability of slander, the difficulties of every kind.

"I don't want to see you a miserable woman, Miss Claudia."

"You are going to see me a happy woman, the happiest of wives, as I am the happiest of sweethearts. And the romance of my marriage will be its secrecy. We are going to meet each other in lonely and lovely places; we are going to wander together over the world. I have dreams of such delight. I shall go with him to Athens, to the Greek Isles, to Africa, to the South Seas, his wife and companion, but he will never be seen in Park Lane, where I shall only go once in a way just to maintain my position as Miss Rayner. Or, if he should ever come there, it would be as my friend, the famous preacher, and we should play our smiling comedy of strangeness before the common herd."

"Oh, Miss Claudia, with all your cleverness you can't make life a fairy tale," sighed Mary.

And as she went to her own room the faithful servant murmured sadly: "It won't wash; no, my poor dear, it won't wash."

The mission at Aberdeen lasted a fortnight, and Claudia heard every one of William Murray's sermons,

and found freshness and beauty in them all, insatiable as a child with a new toy. She had no shame now in going to hear him morning and evening, day after day; and the beautiful face and tall slim figure in a plain black gown, were noticed by many among the changing congregations. She went with her lover into the poorest quarters of the city, and saw his manner of dealing with sad cases and with bad cases, with men and women who welcomed him and hung upon his words, and with the obdurates who kept him at arm's length. In all that she saw and heard it was he whom she admired—her saint and hero, her friend and lover. Even in the midst of his work he found time for long walks with her, and they stood upon the old bridge of Don together in the autumn sunlight, looking down at the dark-brown water rippling over the rocky river-bed, and talking of Byron: "all his boy feelings, all his gentler dreams." Murray found time to show her all that was ancient and interesting in the historic city, the city that had played so great a part in Scotland's story.

"*Bon accord*," she said; "I love the motto. *Bon accord.* Let us take it for our badge, William. I'll have it set in diamonds for a brooch."

"Wear it in your heart, love. You have done with diamonds now."

"Puritan! You forget that I have all the jewels my father and mother gave me on my innumerable birthdays. *Bon accord.* Yes, we will wear it in our hearts. We don't want to blazon it to the world."

The granite city! When Claudia walked there with her lover it was an enchanted city, a place as wonderful as an Apocalyptic Vision, walls of jasper, streets of gold. Were she to go back to it in later years she would not know it. The glamour of happy love hung over it all. That its streets were grey and monotonous, wanting in colour, plain, unpicturesque; that a cold, grey sea beat against a cold, grey coast; that the port was business-like and commonplace; that the market, the college, the churches, were austere and unromantic, were details that she knew not. That was the city of dull reality—the mart, the hard school

of everyday life, with busy scholars hurrying to and fro, getting and spending, and laying waste their hours. Hers was the dream city, steeped in supernal light.

"I shall always love Aberdeen," she told Murray, as they walked from the church to her lodgings under a waning moon, a long walk, but never seeming long enough for those two.

She accused him of wanting the spirit of romance; but he was romantic enough to walk up and down the road in front of the house that hid her from him, choosing to think out next day's sermon there rather than anywhere else, so that he might look up at her lighted windows and fancy himself, as it were, in her atmosphere.

"I am sorry we have only a dying moon to shine upon us to-night," she said, on the eve of their wedding. "She has such a melancholy air in her last quarter. I would have liked a broad-faced moon—the full moon that looks like a jolly laughing face."

It was Monday night, the last night, and they were to be married next day, after due notice, by proclamation. It was the last time they were to bid each other good-bye.

They stood in the shelter of the commonplace portico, hands clasped, and his face was darkly grave.

"Have you written to your uncle, or to your solicitor, Claudia?"

"How many times are you going to ask me that question?"

"Only until you give me a plain answer."

"Well, I have done everything that is necessary, everything that I mean to do, till after we are married. Is that enough?"

"Not quite. You are on the threshold of a great change in your life. Are you reconciled to that change? Are you sure that there will be no recoil, no useless regret? Nothing is irrevocable now. You have only to say, 'I am afraid of being sorry in the aftertime, if I give up all that the world thinks good.' I shall not urge you. I shall not be angry. The Faith in which I was brought up is a school of renunciation. I don't think I am saying too much, if I call

myself a Christian philosopher. Don't be afraid to put my faith to the test, Claudia."

"Why, you foolish man, while you are bragging of your stoicism, your voice trembles, and this dear hand is cold as death. You know that parting would mean broken hearts for both of us. You would go and court fever in Africa, and I should flaunt in London, a miserable woman, perhaps a gambler, insatiable at Bridge, and inevitable at Newmarket."

And then she let her head sink upon his shoulder. She became Cleopatra, and in the clear depth of her eyes there was a melting tenderness, and her lips invited his kisses.

"Good-night, our last good-night," he whispered, and left her, troubled and thoughtful in the midst of joy.

They were married at nine o'clock next morning, in a shabby little church in a shabby neighbourhood, beyond the old town; married by a Presbyterian minister, and the only witnesses were an ancient verger and old Mary in a new grey silk gown. It was a ceremonial of extreme dryness—no organ, no hymn; but it was enough for Claudia, since it made William Murray her husband.

They went straight from the church to the railway station, and it was early in the afternoon when they alighted from a station fly before the gate of a cottage garden at Grasmere, a small garden brimming over with flowers, late roses, single dahlias, scarlet geraniums, asters, japanese anemones—all the flowers that autumn can give to gladden the earth when summer is gone.

The cottage was quite a humble dwelling, but it was neatly furnished, and all its arrangements had been made suitable for gentlefolks. There was nothing to irritate the nerves of a bride reared in Park Lane, and Claudia was charmed with the quaint parlour, the low ceiling with massive oak rafters that she could touch with her hand, the wide open hearth whence burning pile logs diffused a gentle warmth and odours like incense. There were flowers everywhere, and bits of old china; a cracked Lowestoft punch-

bowl, a cracked Battersea teapot, saucerless cups and cupless saucers—those scraps of old English pottery that acquire an adventitious value in cottage parlours from their harmony with the surroundings.

"What an ideal cottage!" cried Claudia, and then laughingly quoted:

> "O darling room, my heart's delight,
> Dear room, the apple of my sight;
> There is no room so exquisite
> Wherein to read, wherein to write."

"I found those foolish lines in the Appendix to Churton Collins's "Tennyson." I suppose the verses are foolish, since the poet suppressed them, but I love them even for their foolishness. Foolish things are sweetest sometimes, like my foolish love. And now take me for a walk," she said, with sudden eagerness, slipping her arm through her husband's and leading him out of doors; "and show me the English mountains, the ponds and hills that have been so near me in my Daneborough days, and that I have never seen."

"You don't deserve to see them now if you call Windermere a pond."

"Compared with Lake Leman, with Constance, or even with your Loch Lomond, it is nothing better than a piece of ornamental water for a nobleman's park."

"Then if we are to measure our admiration by acreage, what can Windermere be to me, who have lived in the land of great lakes—Nyassa, Mweru, Chilwa, Nyanza, and Tanganyika, the inland sea, four hundred miles long? Yet this poor little Grasmere is just as beautiful in my eyes, and Rydal Water more exquisite still."

"I am glad African vastness has not spoilt your eye for England."

"There is luncheon ready in the other parlour," Murray suggested.

"Oh, most matter-of-fact of bridegrooms! Luncheon! And you have the everlasting hills to show me, the hills that figure so splendidly in your psalms.

I want you to tell me about those hills in Judea while we are looking at Helvelyn."

They wandered far in the sunshine and freshness of an exquisite October day, and they took tea in a cottage garden.

"Our wedding day!" Claudia exclaimed in a breathless whisper, as they sat looking at the mountains, as if the fact had struck her with a sudden wonder. "Isn't it absurd?"

"For the moment I fail to see it as farcical comedy," he said, stooping to kiss the hand that was busy with the tea-things.

"Oh, but you would see the absurdity if you knew how I had set my face against marriage, from the time that I was nineteen and began to feel that all was vanity—all, but most especially the young men who were good for nothing but waltzing, and some of them execrable at that. Before I met you I had quite made up my mind that there was not a man on this earth worthy to be my husband, and yet less than a quarter of a year after I first saw your face I am here sitting in the sunset, your wife."

"*Souvent femme varie—bien fol qui s'y fie*," said Murray. "I hope I have not been foolish, and that the woman who chose me for her husband, after foreswearing marriage, will not change her mind again and wish herself unmarried."

The sun drooped behind the hills, and all the world was grey as they went back to Grasmere, a long walk in grey twilight. He called her Atalanta, charmed with the light swift step, the perfect carriage of head and shoulders.

"Cleopatra was an Oriental, and never walked like you," he said; "there, at least, you surpass her."

"I won't be compared with that wicked woman, that serpent of old Nile."

"Only for your spells, your enchantments, your unfathomable eyes. My Cleopatra is no serpent, but a true woman."

* * * * * *

They had been living in the cottage for three days,

and had walked and driven about all the loveliest scenes of hill and vale, so that it seemed to Claudia as if she had known Grasmere and Rydal, and every waterfall and every hillside path all her life, when the first little cloud made a spot of darkness in the golden light of their honeymoon.

It was after their eight o'clock breakfast, and Murray was writing letters at a table by the window while Claudia sat with hat and alpenstock, waiting for him to finish his work and start for a mountain walk. He had written half a dozen letters, with swift, unresting pen, she admiring the small, neat penmanship, the ease and rapidity with which he did his work. She watched him while he wrote, as a child watches some task in which it has a personal interest.

Presently he wrote two lines on a sheet of note-paper and passed it across the table to her.

"Will that do for the *Times?*" he asked.

"'On October the seventh, at St. Peter's, Aberdeen, the Reverend William Murray, D.D., to Claudia, only daughter of the late Ralph Rayner, of Daneborough Park, Derbyshire.'"

She started up suddenly, flushing crimson.

"You are not going to send that?"

"Yes, if you approve of the form. It ought to have been posted on our wedding day—would have been if I had had a best man. But how could I be business-like that day?"

"You want to advertise our marriage—in the *Times*—our marriage that was to be a secret? Oh, William, what are you dreaming of?"

"You wanted to be married quietly—secretly—if you like. It was your whim, and I gave way to you. But, my dearest girl, you could not intend that our marriage was to be a secret for long."

"For long—for always," she said, throwing herself into his arms and sobbing on his breast. "I am your wife, your adoring wife. Is not that enough for you? No man on earth could tempt me away from you, could win one moment's thought of mine from you, who are the central point of all my thoughts. What more do you want? I am your wife, loving you as

men are seldom loved. Oh, I know what women think and feel, and I have never known a woman who loved her husband as I love you! Is not that enough, William? I have given you my heart, my mind, my immortal soul, if I have one to give—but you must let me manage my life in my own way."

"I see," he said huskily; "you have not written to your uncle; you have taken no steps towards the surrender of the property you have forfeited."

"I am never going to surrender it."

"And you think I will be a party to your wrong-doing."

He put her from him with firm, unflinching hand, while she sobbed upon his breast. He turned his back upon her and stood looking across the gaudy flower-beds to the white road, and the little lake that shone so gaily in the morning sun. He was thinking deeply, thinking of this exquisite wife, the crown and glory of his manhood, as he had thought of his dark-skinned heathens in the beginning of his teaching, wondering if they were tameable, if they could ever be made Christians. So he wondered now about her —with pain unspeakable—before he turned to her with a grave smile, and opened his arms and took her to his heart, while she protested passionately.

"You have no right to rob me of the things I love —my people, my little kingdom, the place where I am a queen. My father's will was cruel, unjust, insane. Is not my love enough? Only three days married, and you begin to tyrannise."

The words came in broken sentences, strangled by sobs, but his keen ear heard them and his quick brain understood. His lovely heathen was going to be a difficult subject. He would need patience, fortitude, self-command.

"My love, be comforted," he said very gently. "Only three days married! My bride—my wife! Dearest, you have come to a hard school, the school of renunciation, self-denial, surrender of all things familiar and dear. Very hard, I'm afraid, for my dear girl. And you would not count the cost? Ah, love, I warned you; but I did not think repentance

would come so soon. Only three days married! The fourth day of our honeymoon! Look up, Claudia, we are going to be happy. Will you come for a long ramble, or shall we go to Bowness on the steamer?"

"I'd rather walk. You won't send that advertisement?"

"I will do nothing that can make you unhappy in our honeymoon."

"My dearest!"

She kissed him, and the golden light came into eyes that had been drowned in tears. She thought that her will had prevailed, or rather that his love had yielded. And from this hour there was no shadow on her honeymoon, a time of exquisite content, during which her husband's mind and nature were gradually revealed to her, every day bringing them nearer together, and, as she thought, in more perfect sympathy.

No allusion to her worldly possessions ever fell from his lips in those delightful days, or in those long evenings when they sat in the lamplit parlour talking or reading, or discussing the book that each read, or Murray reading to her while she pretended to work.

They were both book-lovers, but it might be said that one had read much, while the other had read many things. Claudia was the omnivorous reader. Her years of mourning and isolation had given her ample leisure for wandering in the world of books; and she had read widely while, in her own phrase, she was learning to think. She astonished and sometimes pained her husband by her familiarity with modern ideas about religion. She had read Harnach and other theologians of the German school. She had read the believers and the unbelievers, theists, positivists, ultramontains, esoteric Buddhists, visionaries of every kind, and hardened materialists. Simple unquestioning faith in old formulas must be impossible for an Eve who had eaten so greedily of the forbidden tree. It was something that her books had left her a fervent love of man's Redeemer, and a willingness to believe that He was, in some mystic manner, if not in the most exalted supernatural way,

a Divine Being. Without Greek or Latin she had loved classic literature, and had steeped her mind in Jowett's "Plato." Schopenhauer, Hartmann, all the modern metaphysicians, and some of the old ones had been the companions of her solitude. She had read Mills's "Logic," and Whewell's "History of the Inductive Sciences"; she had read Victor Cousin, and the best of the French philosophers.

Murray praised and wondered at the extent of her reading.

"I made up my mind never to open a frivolous book while I was learning to think," she told him.

He smiled, and said gently:

"Then I may feel secure in the strength of my wife's reason as well as in the tenderness of her heart. No illogical argument can come from a mind that has fed upon Mill and Whewell."

She knew that he was laughing at her.

His own reading had been of a different school, less modern and less various; but the literature to which he had given his nights and days was the literature of power—Homer, the Greek tragedians, Virgil, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, the nobler among the Elizabethans. He had read much; that was his distinction, and his knowledge of the authors he loved was wide and deep. He had them in his mind and in his heart. He could have made a plan of the Dante circles, descending or ascending; or he could have mapped the crack-brained knight errant's journeys, with every village, wood, mountain, plain, and hostelry. Between them these wedded lovers had a world of imagination in which to expatiate. All their talk was of things far away from the sordid considerations of riches or poverty. He told her of his African adventures, or of his younger years in Scotland, in Dublin. She was never tired of questioning him about the years that were gone. His father and mother, his grandfather the weaver, who figured vividly in his memories of childhood. She made him talk of himself.

"I want to know all that you ever thought or felt," she said, "since the dawn of reason. I hope you have

no memories you must hide from me, no dark gulfs that I must not look into."

"Not very dark; sad rather than dark."

"Ah, then there was a Rosaline. I am not your first love."

"Do you think a man could come to thirty-seven without having loved?"

And then he told her that he had loved and lost, before he joined the Church Missionary Society.

"It was death that sent me into the wilderness," he said. "I had no choice between suicide and such strenuous work as might make me forget myself and my sorrow. The girl I was to have married fifteen years ago was drowned crossing a loch in the Highlands. A sudden squall capsized the little sailing boat, and she and three of her friends were lost. The news came to me in Dublin, the day after I took my degree. I had telegraphed my good luck to her in the morning, and I was full of happy thoughts when I opened the brown envelope, expecting her message of congratulation."

"Don't speak of it," Claudia cried, with sudden tears. "I can see how it hurts you even now."

And then, after a silence:

"But you can bear to speak of her. Tell me about her? Fifteen years ago! More than half my life. Tell me about her. Was she beautiful?"

"Nobody praised her for beauty, but to me she seemed lovely. No, no, Claudia," answering the glance that questioned. "Her image can never be your rival. She was no beauty—only an innocent Highland lassie, reared in a village manse, not accomplished, not even clever, but with a gift for music and a voice as pure and true as a skylark's."

Claudia meditated, jealous even of those distant years.

"I was in the schoolroom, stumbling through Chopin's easiest nocturne, grinding at French and German exercises. Fifteen years ago! I hadn't even left off pinafores. I must ask Mary what I was like fifteen years ago. If we had met then he wouldn't have looked at me. I could not have come between him and his Highland girl."

And then she put out her hand and clasped his, looking at him through her tears.

"I am sorry for your old sorrow," she said gently.

"There was remorse as well as sorrow. I hated myself for my egotism. I had been self-absorbed, not forgetful of my dear girl, but too intent upon working for my degree, working early and late, and though she was always in my thoughts, and though her future happiness might depend upon my success, I was too eager to succeed. I let ambition come between me and my love. My letters to her had been too brief, too hurried. I had promised to write fully afterwards, to go to her as soon as I was free. And there was no after, and when I went to her it was to stand beside her coffin, too late even for the last agonising look."

He got up and moved about the room, trying to hide his agitation, pretending to look for a particular volume among the books on a side table, while Claudia watched him, telling herself that his sorrow was an old sorrow, and that jealousy on her part was impossible.

A week, a fortnight, three weeks, their third Sunday at the church in whose shadow He sleeps whose spirit breathes through all that is fair or sad, tender or joyous, in those familiar scenes. The waning moon that had looked upon the eve of their espousals was dead and buried. First a slender silver crescent, and then the broad-faced, copper-red moon had lighted their evening walks, and now her face was beginning to look pinched and narrow, and she, too, would soon be dead.

Where were they going at the end of their honeymoon? Claudia trembled as she asked herself that question. To neither of her splendid homes could they go without telling the secret that would rob her of those possessions for ever. A word, and Daneborough and the White House, and all that they held, would vanish like the withered leaves that fell in the woods that were still her own. All must go, if she let her husband claim her before the face of the world.

A yacht: first the Mediterranean, and then the

South Seas. That was her day dream, her dream by night, as she lay by his side who had sterner dreams. She heard him sigh in his sleep sometimes, a profound sigh, as of a mind sorely distressed ; but in his waking hours he showed few signs of trouble. He was always kind, and generally cheerful, delighting in their simple life, the long walks, the long drives, in which they left no spot of beauty or romance or historic memory unexplored. She thought that he was going to be always kind ; that he was content to let her manage her life in her own way, and that she would easily persuade him to fall in with her plans, and then they would go together to Glasgow and find the yacht that was to be the modern substitute for the enchanter's magic carpet, and was to carry them to the other side of the world.

She thought that she could defy slander and curiosity. She had established herself as an eccentric in the opinion of society. What could be said except that Miss Rayner had gone on a long cruise with no one but an old servant. And, later, if she were seen with Murray in some foreign port, in a chance meeting with an acquaintance, she could explain him as her secretary, or even as her captain.

"What could I call him better than my captain ?" she thought smiling ; "but it would be me, not the boat, that he would command."

She was often dreaming of that voyage as she sat by her husband in the roomy hired landau, while he was silent and thoughtful. He had those intervals of thought upon which she did not venture to intrude.

She gave herself up to her day dream, the long, long voyage over seas that were always calm, under a sky that always smiled, from port to port in the historic inland sea, from isle to isle in the vast Southern ocean. She could foresee no end to that happy voyage, since any idea of a settled home was impossible, only long lingering in remote unfrequented places, and then the white wings unfurled again, and off and away.

And what of Skepton, her kingdom, to keep which she was to forego honour and honesty ? Her dreams

grew troubled at the thought of Skepton. She could not go there with her husband. The one place that she would most desire to show him, the church where she would most love to hear his voice, the people she wanted him to know and help, the community in which he might become so potent an influence—that place must be shut against him for ever.

Look where she would there were complications. A wandering life seemed the only solution of all difficulties; endless roaming over sunny seas, cheating winter, sheltering from stormy weather, in a boat that should have all the comforts and charms and individuality of an accustomed home; with a captain whose fine seamanship might defy the elements, and a crew of smiling bluejackets. She could see nothing before them but perpetual exile, hiding their happiness from all who knew Miss Rayner. But for them exile might mean a life of supreme delight; a life of poetry, adventure, and romance, and of noble influences, for wherever *he* went he would find missionary work to be done. Among the savage or among the civilised, he would be the bringer of good tidings, the messenger whose path is the path of light.

She would have to reconcile herself to a long severance from the place that she had called her kingdom; and now looking inward she had to confess to herself that her affection for the place of her father's creation, for the people he had loved, was not her only reason for refusing to acknowledge the marriage that involved the loss of her fortune. It was her millions, the mere sordid wealth that she refused to surrender. Love was hers, the love for which many women have counted the world well lost; but for her love was not enough. She could not face the loss of that golden atmosphere in which she had lived and moved from infancy, the power to have everything she wanted, to give with liberal hands, to heal all the hurts that money can cure, to be bounteous without measure, to have happy service from servants who knew they could never find a better home or higher wages.

She had thought that these things were nothing, and that it was only her workshops, the crowds of

prosperous workers, the schools, and hospitals, and people's park, that she valued; but on turning the light of reason upon that question of surrender or no surrender, she saw that she cared for more sordid things—her fine houses, the art treasures that her father had collected with so much discrimination and so much trouble—Daneborough, the White House! No, she could not let an unjust will rob her of things that were hers by right as her father's heiress.

She might not be able to live in either of those houses, as William Murray's wife, but she could not tolerate the idea of her cousins living there; those essentially common girls, who had always bored her, and whom she now absolutely hated, now that there was a question of their taking her place. She could picture them in Park Lane, pretending not to be proud of their possessions. She knew their air of mock humility, the tone in which Ruby had apologised for the Early Victorian furniture at Vale Hall. If they owned the White House they would apologise for the Mortlake tapestry, and tell people that it cost only fourteen thousand pounds. They would give great entertainments, imitating her mother's parties, and people would go to them, not the *crême de la crême*, but a very good imitation of that patrician quintessence. They would find plenty of people to coach them; Sylvester Treswick, for instance, who would tell them that he had been Lady Magdalen's right hand and had made her social success. And her fat commonplace aunt would sit in phlegmatic beatitude in rooms so unsuitable to her character and temperament, so different from the environment in which she had lived from youth to middle age, that she might be expected to languish slowly and die of the change. It was intolerable to contemplate. These people were rich, according to their own measure of wealth, and they were happy, proud of themselves and their surroundings. They were in their proper element. There could be no kindness in transplanting them to Mayfair. There would be snubbing and disappointments and cutting humiliations for those pert provincial girls. In such a case the *crême de la crême*

might be trusted. However civil the dinner and supper-eating herd might be, the quintessential people would be true to their order, and the line would be severely drawn against such new-comers.

* * * * * *

The time was close at hand when their plans for the future had to be made. The cottage had been hired for a month only, and Claudia knew that it was let to other tenants for the coming winter, so their term could not be extended. It was within three days of the end of their occupation of that humble home; yet no word had been spoken as to where they were to go next. No word had been spoken of the common details of life since she had forbidden the announcement of her marriage. That one sharp encounter, the brief storm of angry tears and passionate kisses, had been their first and last quarrel. She told herself that he had submitted to her will, and that she was to rule their lives.

She believed this, yet as the days wore on she shrank with a curious dread from any discussion of their circumstances. Friend, companion, lover—he had been all, and more than all, that she had imagined in the dual life; and that perfect life had taught her what a dreary existence her self-absorbed isolation in her palace of art had been. Oh, the delight of being with him in this cottage parlour, to have him sitting opposite to her at the little table, their open books between them, talking of the things that both loved, or searching deeper and deeper into his thoughts and memories, growing nearer and nearer to him as she grew more familiar with the mind that is the man.

Never had there been a happier honeymoon, save for that one disturbing question: what was to be the next stage in life's journey? And would he be, indeed, as pliant to love and her sovereign will as she hoped and expected?

It was on the last morning but two, she found him sitting at the table by the open window reading a closely-written page of foreign paper.

"A letter from Africa?" she asked, with a thrill of fear.

"Yes, from an old friend and comrade."

"When did it come? By this morning's post?"

"Oh, no! It is an old letter, nearly half a year old."

"Urging you to go back?"

"All my correspondents sing that song. There is more work than workers. It is hardly a compliment to be wanted there."

"And you are more needed here," she said eagerly, and then remembering her wandering scheme. "You are wanted all over the world, like St. Paul."

He folded up the letter and put it in his breast pocket. Their breakfast was on the table, and he took his place opposite his wife. He was very pale, and she looked in vain for his smile, the smile that was wont to reflect her own.

"Such a heavenly morning!" she said. "But you are looking sad and careworn. That horrid letter has disturbed you."

"It is a very good letter, full of hopeful news of my old flock."

"Why did you read it again? What made you read it to-day?"

"Because it is full of facts that interest me. Circumstances that I had half forgotten."

She asked no more questions, but a look of trouble had come into her face, and her appetite for breakfast was gone. Only two more clear days, yet he had said no word of where they were to go when they left the cottage. She looked round the pretty rustic room in an agony of regret and fear. Oh, that the wheels of time could stand still for ever, and that they could remain as they were, a hundred years; not in unconscious sleep, but in a dream—dream-lovers in a dream-world.

"You will never go back," she burst out at last, with passion in her voice and looks, starting up from the table.

"To Africa? Not unless I am driven there as a refuge from grief."

"What grief?"

"If I were to lose all that I hold dearest in life."

"Don't be afraid of that. I am not going to die," she said, betwixt laughter and tears, falling on her knees beside his chair, nestling her head against his arm, no longer the anxious, questioning woman, but again the honeymoon bride, with flashes of gold in the clear darkness of her adoring eyes.

* * * * * *

The last day had come, soft and mild as summer, though it was November in London, and all the city splendour and pomposity had been smothered in fog more than a week ago. Here the gaudy autumn flowers were shining in the clear light, and late bees were buzzing and late thrushes and blackbirds and hardy robins were singing, and the sky and the waters were blue. The last day, and Mary had packed the pretty white frocks that had been the bride's only wear, and all was ready for departure. A fly had been ordered, and a cart for the luggage, to meet a mid-day train, but no word had been said of plans or destination.

William Murray ate, or pretended to eat, his breakfast in silence, his wife sitting opposite him, watching him with troubled eyes, and a heart that was heavy with fear. She knew now that things were not going to shape themselves easily, that he was not going to be as pliant as she had thought, that there would have to be a battle. She might conquer in the end, perhaps; but there would be a hard fight, and her courage was ebbing fast as she watched the face she loved.

He was unhappy. She had heard him muttering in his sleep. He had sighed broken-heartedly, and when she kissed the sleeping face, it was wet with his tears.

They went into the other parlour after breakfast. Umbrellas and sunshades, alpenstock, books, writing-cases, were all packed ready for the journey. The room had the look of a place that is going to be deserted.

"How happy I have been here," Claudia said, with almost a sob.

He took her in his arms, and looked at her fondly.

"My darling, is that true? Have you been happy?"

"Happier than I ever was before in all my life."

"What! in a cottage parlour, in a garden of half an acre, with only Mary and a village maid-of-all-work to wait upon you, happy without a butler and four footmen, without fine rooms, or fine carriages, or fine clothes? Is that true, Claudia? Have you been happy?"

"Unspeakably, ineffably! Happier than words can tell."

"Then, my beloved girl, you see how little happiness depends upon money. You would laugh if I told you what our honeymoon has cost in vulgar cash. You would hardly believe that anyone but Lady Patricia's poor old dears could live upon so little."

"I have been happy with you," she said, a troubled look coming into her face; "palace or hovel would be the same if you were with me."

"Yes, that is what love means. We have an hour before the fly comes for us. Shall we go down to the lake, or to the churchyard to leave some flowers on Wordsworth's grave?"

"To the churchyard. But, William, you have not told me where we are going this afternoon."

"Where? Why, to Skepton, of course. I suppose your rooms at the works can accommodate us for a few days, while you show me the place and the people, and while we plan our future. I have had the offer of a living near London, not half a bad one, with a rural vicarage and garden, and yet within half an hour of the West-end, the concert halls, and picture-galleries. I don't mean my wife to be buried alive, even if she is to be poor."

She had hardly heard anything he had said after his announcement about Skepton. She was deadly pale, and her lips were trembling.

"We are not going to Skepton," she said.

"But, my dearest, it is absolutely necessary. I

yielded to your wish about the advertisement of our marriage, very much against my will; for if the knowledge had come to your uncle by any side wind, how meanly he would have thought of me. I waited till the end of our honeymoon, to please you; for a honeymoon is a chapter out of a fairy tale, and business details, sordid considerations, can wait till the end of that golden dream. But we are face to face with stern reality now, and there must not be an hour's needless delay. We shall be at Skepton early in the afternoon, and we must go straight to your uncle and tell him what has happened."

"And give him everything in the world that is mine, mine by right as my father's only child? My father was not in his proper senses when he made that cruel will. He knew very little about me, or he would never have thought that I had anything in common, mentally, with my poor brother. Don't look at me like that, William. Nothing you can say will ever make me see that I ought to fling everything I possess into my uncle's lap. He is rich already, over-rich for his ideas of life. His children are commonplace and narrow-minded—provincial—oh, how intolerably provincial! They shall never have my fortune."

"Dearest, it is no longer your fortune. You forfeited all when you married me."

"They shall not have it," she said frowning, the Cleopatra face dark with anger. "They shall never have it. I am your secret wife, William. Is not that enough for you. I always meant to be your secret wife."

"You did not tell me so."

"Not in so many words. You are so quixotic, so impracticable."

"I hope I am honest."

"The secrecy was the charm of our marriage. How sweet it has been in this place, not a creature knowing anything about us; we two alone in our own romantic world. And it can be so always. We are going to wander about this beautiful earth, to roam from place to place, among strange people, among

fresh and interesting races, new ideas, new languages, new customs. We are going to be free as the air, not penned in a suburban vicarage. And the secrecy of our union will be its charm."

"Not for me. I like to be able to look my fellow-man straight in the face; and I couldn't do that if the wife I idolise was a cheat. You may be my secret wife, Claudia, but I shall never be your secret husband."

"What do you mean?"

Her shaking hands clasped his neck and clung to his coat collar, as if she were trying to hold him against his will.

"If your millions are so dear to you, dearer than honour and honesty, you may try to keep them. I will not come between you and your heart's desire. You may be the wife of a honeymoon, one little month of perfect union, but that must be the end of our story. From this day we must be strangers."

"What?" she cried. "You *can* leave me?"

"I can do anything rather than be your partner in a life of fraud."

"You can leave me—after——" tears choked her speech.

"After I have loved you, and been loved by you. Hard lines, isn't it, Claudia? But you are the mistress of our fate. Have you thought what parting means for you and me?"

"Have *you* thought what it means?" she cried passionately. "Can you fling me off and go back to your own world and forget me? If you can you have never loved me—as I thought you loved. Your love was only a man's love, easily satisfied."

She turned from him in scornful anger, stubborn in her determination to manage her life in her own way.

And the white wings of the fairy ship that was to have wafted them from port to port upon the historic sea, and then farther and farther from all the people she knew to that vast ocean whose waves sound their solemn requiem by Robert Stevenson's island grave. Oh, the dreams that she had dreamed, her childish

castle-building, as she lay by her husband's side, dropping asleep in the midst of a vision of some place of beauty where they were to dwell together! What an awakening! The face she loved confronted her, sternly set, cold and cruel; for she counted it cruelty in a lover-husband to oppose her will. The least that he could do to prove his love was to let her have her own way in everything.

"And you really mean to leave me?" she said.

"Yes, until you recall me."

"At the price of surrendering everything?"

"At that price, and nothing less. By the by, do you forget that in the event of your marriage your father left you an annuity of seven hundred pounds? There are people I know who would think I had caught an heiress, if my wife had seven hundred a year."

"You mean to leave me?"

"I have no option."

"Will you go back to Africa?"

"I think so."

"Oh!" she said, drawing a deep breath, and setting her teeth together; "you are a hard man."

"The fly will be here presently. Will you go to Skepton with Mary?"

"No, to Daneborough. Most of my servants are there, and my fox terrier. You see, I have one living thing that loves me, better than ever you loved me, for he could not leave me."

She struggled with her tears, calmed herself by a great effort, and then looked at him with a pale smile.

"We may as well have our last walk," she said. "That will make no difference."

They sauntered slowly down the road to the old churchyard and stood beside the plain stone slab that marks Wordsworth's grave, looking at it as if it were the grave of all their hopes. He was very pale, and his face had the inscrutable look that had attracted her at their first meeting, the something grave, restrained, remote from common clay; a strength held in check, power of mind, will, nerve, muscle, physical power equal to mental power—a double force.

Once when they were climbing a hill together, and

he grasped her arm, to hold her up, she told him that he reminded her of the Nasmyth hammer.

"You are so strong, and yet you can be so gentle," she said.

And now that strength was working against her. It was a struggle of will against will, and she knew that he was to be the conqueror.

Her pride rose up in arms against him, pride of the beauty that he had so often praised, pride of the love that she had given him in utter self-abandonment, love without measure, the love of the slave for an idolised master.

Walking slowly by his side in a sullen silence she thought of the women who had ruled men, women who had not all been beautiful, who had not all been chaste, or even constant to the lover who wrecked his life for love.

She thought of Emma Hamilton, remembered in her hero's dying breath. Yes, that was love ; Nelson's for Emma ; Shelley's for Mary ; love for which adverse influences were of no account. And most of all she thought of the serpent of old Nile.

He had called her Cleopatra, one sunny morning, when she stood before him in her deshabille of muslin and lace, with her dark hair falling almost to her knees, her dark eyes smiling at him. They had read the tragedy together, at her insistence, and she had hung upon every line that told of that great reckless fate-defying love. And now those lines were in her memory as she walked by her husband's side, stubborn and unyielding, and angry with him for not having yielded :

> "Egypt, thou knew'st too well,
> My heart was to thy rudder tied by the strings,
> And thou should'st tow me after : o'er my spirit
> Thy full supremacy thou knew'st, and that
> Thy beck might from the bidding of the gods
> Command me.
>
> * * * * * * *
>
> Fall not a tear, I say : one of them rates
> All that is won and lost."

That was what love meant in the heroic ages.

They drove to the station together, Mary sitting

solemnly opposite them, and a cart following with the luggage. Murray put his wife and her maid into a reserved carriage. He may have thought that it was good for her to have the faithful Mary on guard in those hours of agitation. He told Claudia the places at which they would have to change trains.

"You will have a wait of nearly an hour at Leeds," he said, "and you will be able to get luncheon."

"That is very important," Claudia answered, with pale lips.

"And you will be at Daneborough by tea-time."

"It is kind of you to be so thoughtful about my meals."

He waited at the carriage door, grave and silent, till the train was starting, and then he held out his hand and clasped hers, both hands gloveless, and both deadly cold. She had pulled off her long loose gloves and thrown them upon the opposite seat, perhaps with some fond idea of that last touch of meeting hands.

She was all in white, almost as on their wedding morning, and her face was as pale as her gown. She sat speechless, not able to echo his grave "good-bye," and her eyes were wild with anger and grief as she looked at him, standing with lifted hat, and so vanishing from her sight.

CHAPTER XIX.

It was a dismal home-coming. Mary had telegraphed from Leeds, and Claudia's carriage was waiting for her at the station. She got into it automatically, without asking how it came there, but even in her indifference to all mundane things she was dimly conscious that her brougham was more luxurious than the hired landau at Grasmere.

Rag was glad to see her—but no one else. He leapt upon her knees and gave excited squeals, with quivering paws upon her shoulders, and a wide open panting mouth, hysterical with joy. No one else was glad, though everybody was polite.

Mrs. Vickers was profuse in her apologies, and every apology was a covert reproach, implying that no household ought to be taken by surprise as this household had been.

"It was as much as we could do to get the chintz covers on the drawing-room furniture," said the housekeeper, "and I'm afraid you won't like your morning-room without a single flower. Well, I believe one of the housemaids went out and picked a few garden chrysanthemums—but being Saturday the men had all gone home, and the greenhouses were locked."

Saturday! was it Saturday? She had forgotten the day of the week—she had kept no count of days at Grasmere. She only knew how soon Sunday came again—how swift had been the flight of the happy weeks.

Then to-morrow would be Sunday! Hateful day to a soul in pain!

Her aunt and the vicar appeared before she had begun breakfast, with all the tiresome briskness of people who go to bed at ten o'clock and boast of getting up at six.

"My dear Claudia, this is a delightful surprise. I thought you were roaming in Central Europe. Emily told me she had sent you her pet courier, with whom you would be safe at the world's end."

"I changed my mind, and have been in Scotland with old Mary."

"Only Mary?"

"Who else could I want in Scotland?"

"Not even a footman!"

The tone implied horror—or resignation to the idea of ineradicable eccentricity in the character of an otherwise charming niece.

Claudia poured out her tea in silence, and then recollecting herself:

"Vicar — aunt, may I give you some tea — or coffee?"

"My dear child, we breakfasted an hour ago, directly after the service."

"The early service. I am very late this morning. I was tired."

"After your journey from the Highlands, what was your last point?"

"Shetland," said Claudia, with angry flashes in her eyes. Her life from this hour was going to be a lie, so the sooner she began lying the better.

"Shetland! What a horrid place—positively no hotel accommodation! Whatever made you choose Shetland?"

"I went out to see the world—the Scottish world. Dear Aunt Louisa, please let me off any description of my tour. The tour bored me to extinction. Having to recall its disappointments and discomforts would be worse."

"My poor, poor child," sighed Lady Louisa, remembering the deprivation from which her niece suffered, the deprivation o such a husband as the Reverend Wilfred Lauriston, who had helped himself to a cup of coffee, and was hovering over the

brilliant copper heater to see which of the dishes was the most appetising.

"The air is crisp this morning, and the walk across the park has given me a second appetite."

"Yours was a hard-roed bloater, Wilfred. I was sure it was, though you wouldn't admit it," said the tender wife. "You have no idea how constantly he makes these little sacrifices, Claudia."

"Is a hard-roed bloater penitential? They ought to be kept for Lent."

"My dear, bloaters are not in season at that time of year."

The Reverend Wilfred had attacked this second meal from boredom, rather than from love of food. Claudia's ennui had communicated itself to him.

"How did you know that I had come home, Aunt Louisa?"

"My dear girl! How did I know? Everybody who came out of church this morning was talking about it. So glad to hear that my niece had come back—quite suddenly—nobody had heard anything about it—not a word in the local paper, and everybody hopes you are going to stay at Daneborough all the winter, and to hunt. And that is what I hope most earnestly—I mean the staying. I never have been in favour of women in the hunting field."

"Then you may be happy," said Claudia, "for I mean to stay, and I don't mean to hunt."

Lady Louisa implored her to come to supper at the Vicarage. The daughter of a long line of Saffords had stood out valiantly against the middle-classishness of the Sunday evening meal, but both cook and parlourmaid had been too strong for her. They could not have their "outings" interfered with, even by a Lady Louisa; and as they were good servants, of the kind denominated "treasures," the Safford pride had to bend its crest to domestic convenience. The vicar had been reared upon cold Sundays, and ate his lamb and salad with a relish, and Lady Louisa had no objection to the food. It was the middle-classishness that irked her.

Claudia regretted that she did not feel up to

society. She was tired, and would stay at home after church; yes, she meant to go to the eleven o'clock service.

Her aunt insisted on waiting to walk to church with her, and Claudia could not refuse, though anybody's company was a burden. She would have shirked even the eleven o'clock service if she had dared; but the horror of the fuss that would be made if she pleaded illness, and the impossibility of any other excuse, prevented shirking.

She put on her smartest toque, the fresh gloves, and snow-white feather stole that Félicité had laid out for her, and submitted to have her veil arranged by that skilful young person, who expatiated all the time upon Madame's *bonté* in having extended the period of her holiday with the old father and mother, and her fear that Madame must have been inconvenienced by having only Mary to attend upon her.

"I was in country places, and wanted very little lady's-maiding," Claudia answered carelessly.

She walked to church with her aunt, who told her some of the local news on the way. It was nearly half a year since she had been in Daneborough, and things had happened. One or two people had died, and a girl had run away with her mother's coachman.

Claudia heard nothing, saw nothing. She walked in a waking dream, a dream of wild regret, and wild resolve to have her own way. She would not give up Daneborough. These oaks and beeches, these woodland paths that she had trodden ever since she was seven years old, when the place was her father's new toy, and when he had insisted upon living in the old wing of the house while the new château was being built. The place was a part of her life; and she was a part of the place.

She walked automatically, bowed to the smiling neighbours and smiled automatically. She did not know when she went in at the church door, knew nothing till she found herself kneeling in her old place, and remembered how last Sunday, just at this hour, she had been kneeling at her husband's side, her soul uplifted as if she had been at the gate of heaven.

To-day everything was colourless as a dull dream. The music, the prayers, the Reverend Wilfred's sermon, which he had been thinking out, or rather polishing, at her breakfast table, while he munched a truffled cutlet. She gave neither her aunt nor the neighbours a chance of accosting her after the service, but walked home with her Atalanta step, found her dogs, and took them for a long ramble, up to her favourite hill.

The beauty had gone out of everything ; the savour had gone out of life. She went home weary and dejected, after trying her old cure of out-walking blue devils, and she knew that she was a miserable woman ; hopeless, since there was but one cure for her misery, and she had rejected it.

She longed and waited impatiently for every post. There were only two postal deliveries at Daneborough, morning and evening. The tedious day might bring her telegrams, but no letter.

He would write to her, that was inevitable. He could not relinquish her without a struggle. He would hold out perhaps for some time, while he was trying to live without her ; and then he would give way. If he suffered as she was suffering—or half as much—he must give way, and take her back to his heart on her own terms.

She knew that he loved her. She knew, she knew. He loved her with all the force of his strenuous impassioned nature. He who had been willing to sacrifice health and life for the heathen—to suffer hardships which had made her shudder when he related them, but at which he had laughed ; surely such a man as that, and such a lover, would not shrink from sacrificing something of his own pride, even of his own ideas of right, to the woman he loved.

Again and again she thought of Nelson, and that Neapolitan history that has cast a shadow upon the hero's fame. And it was so little that she asked from him as the price of her love—only to be neutral, quiescent, and to let her manage her life her own way, and keep the things that were hers by right.

No, she would not have Mathew's brood in pos-

session of Daneborough, of her mother's sacred room, where she sat alone, as in the dark weeks after her father's death. They should never come there as owners, push about the furniture, alter things that her mother had chosen and planned, turn out old servants, bring in vulgar visitors, degrade, defile, ruin the place she loved.

Because her father, in an hour of despair that touched the verge of madness, had put a bar against her inheritance—her natural inheritance as his only surviving child—was she to submit, when reason and justice would sanction her evasion of that unjust condition ?

He would write to her, and she would reply, setting out her reasons, her justification, calmly and wisely, proving herself in the right. She felt strong enough to conquer even his strong will. She and love against the world.

"I don't believe he can live without me."

That was the fond hope at the bottom of her mind. He loved her too much to lose her.

The days went by and there was no letter. Shoals of letters of no importance. Appeals from charitable and philanthropic institutions innumerable, an overpowering mass of expensive stationery. She flung them into her waste-paper basket without looking at them. Her anonymous contributions to London charities were on so munificent a scale that she could afford to be careless of all casual appeals. The rich Miss Rayner's name appeared in no list of subscribers. The outer philanthropic world plied her with stationery, and refused to give her up as a bad job.

One morning in a sudden burst of impatience she snatched the hairbrush from Félicité's hand, on which that young person, who had a worse temper than her mistress, talked about wishing to leave.

Her doom was sealed on the instant. Claudia sent her away that afternoon with a cheque for six months' wages, hardly a solatium for the loss of so excellent a place. Félicité wept for two hours on end in the housekeeper's room, wept even while she ate her dinner.

"Les emportements de mademoiselle vont de mal en pis," she sobbed; "je ne saurais plus les souffrir."

Claudia breathed more freely when her Parisienne had vanished. She wanted no one but old Mary about her; the faithful friend who would not wonder at her tears, her sleepless nights, her irritability; the friend who knew.

She had been at Daneborough three weeks and no word had come from her husband. Her husband! She had loved the name; but William Murray was no longer her husband, until he should choose to conquer his pride, and to submit to a life of her shaping. Her exquisite yacht, the floating home that imagination had depicted in such radiant lights and glowing colour, sailing for ever on summer seas! Alas, that romantic home had drifted out of reach, lost on the storm-beaten ocean of actual life.

She shut herself in her palace of art. Callers came from far and near—people who had enjoyed the hospitalities of Daneborough, and who had talked of Lady Magdalen as "an acquisition." Every one was eager to pay attention to Miss Rayner, but she was always over the hills and far away with her dogs when people called. Indeed, she made a point of being either walking or driving at the orthodox hour for calls. When cards had accumulated she drove about on a round of duty visits, and hated the people who happened to be at home, and with whom she had to go through the usual banal performance of enquiry and reply.

She gave no hint of entertaining, and was uncertain as to the length of her residence at Daneborough. She had some idea of spending the winter and early spring in Italy.

Lady Louisa came to see her niece two or three times a week, and could not be shut out. She urged Claudia to go about more, and to ask people to her house.

"Surely you must have girl friends you would like to have with you, nice girls who would brighten this great house," said Lady Louisa, but Claudia replied grimly:

"I never cared much for girls, and I care less now. Please don't pity me, Aunt Louisa. I like being alone. I read a great deal, and I have my piano, which has always been a beloved companion."

"But, my dear Claudia, at your age a solitary life is impossible."

"I have not found it so."

"I am bound to tell you that you are looking far from well, and I am afraid if you go on in this way you will bring on a *maladie de langueur*. I wish you would let me take you to see Sir George Stowell. He did wonders for your Aunt Lavinia. I should think nothing of running up to London with you. We could come back the same day if you wished."

Claudia would not hear of a doctor, and with all possible politeness she made her aunt understand that she would not submit to be worried.

"The poor child is an eccentric," Lady Louisa told her husband. "It is the iron people's blood, no doubt, that will show itself. Her splendid fortune is wasted upon her. She has no idea of living up to it. Three weeks alone in that huge house, and she has not asked even us to dinner. There is not a drop of the Safford blood in her."

Having stated this curious physiological fact, Lady Louisa thought she had accounted for everything.

Three weeks, and then a fourth week in which Claudia's restlessness had increased, and her dejection deepened. There was a couplet in Burger's ghastly ballad that kept repeating itself in her brain as she wandered about the woods where the beeches were crimson and the Spanish chestnuts a pale gold, in the mists of November:—

> "Bei ihm, bei ihm ist Seligkeit,
> Und ohne Wilhelm Hölle!"

Without him, without her bridegroom, her honeymoon husband! To take her own way in life, to keep the things she cared for; but to live and die without the man she loved!

> "Und ohne Wilhelm Hölle."

The words beat upon her brain in the silence of

wakeful nights — while she waited for his letter. He *must* write to her, she told herself again and again. It was not possible that their stormy interview in the cottage parlour, and their freezing farewell at the station, could be the end.

The letter came when December was a week old.

"My Dear Claudia,—

"I would not write to you about myself until I had made up my mind as to the scene of my future labours, and it was only yesterday that I decided upon going back to Africa, the place where I can be most useful to mankind, and where I shall have the best chance of schooling myself to bear, if not to forget, the bitter disappointment of our parting hour.

"From the moment when you protested against the publication of our marriage, I knew that I had a difficult task before me. I had to win you from your false view of life to the honest acceptance of the forfeit which you yourself had made, of your free will, not constrained or persuaded by a lover, who sternly held himself in check, who even tried to prevent a sacrifice that he feared might be beyond your power of renunciation. You were no victim of a lover's selfish passion. Until you were my wife you did not know the measure of my love. You gave yourself to me freely and deliberately; and how could I know that you did not as freely surrender the fortune which was forfeited by your marriage?

"That you could mean to hide that marriage—that you could for a moment believe that I would submit to a life of fraud, and that you could keep your place in the world as the rich Miss Rayner, with a surreptitious husband, never entered into my thoughts. I submitted to our unattended wedding as the caprice of a romantic girl; and it was only your objection to the advertisement of our marriage that opened my eyes to the truth. I was grieved, inexpressibly shocked; but I did not despair. We were so completely one in feeling, if not in thought, that I hoped everything from your love. I saw you happy in

our humble surroundings; and I thought your mind had been opened to the insignificance of the things the world values, though every individual in that world is ready to admit that wealth never can bring happiness. You were happy, and I thought you were convinced of your error, and that there could be no more war of wills between a husband and wife who loved as we loved, with all the strength of soul and mind and heart.

"I had seen in you so much of noble thought and generous feeling I could not think that gold would turn the scale when love and honour were in the balance.

> 'Nach Golde drängt,
> Am Golde hängt
> Doch Alles. Ach, wir Armen!'

"Then came the bitter disappointment, the ruin of my life; unless in the weeks that have gone by since we parted your better judgment has shown you the only honourable course possible. Remember, Claudia, that in asking you to take that course, I am not condemning you to a life of abject poverty. I would shape my existence in all things for your happiness. I should have no difficulty in getting a living in town or country. The Bishop of Midlandshire is my friend, and in his diocese there are many delightful places. For your sake I would choose a rural parish, where our home would be attractive and our surroundings picturesque. For your sake I would fold my hands and say 'the chief work of my life is done.' I would preach to tenant-farmers, and work among agricultural labourers and their families, and teach rustic children, and keep evening classes for clodhoppers. I would narrow my mission to half a dozen villages and a market town; and you should spend your income upon things you love, upon your rose garden, upon horses to ride and drive, upon pretty clothes and a clever maid. You should be as charming, as dazzling, as admired, upon seven hundred a year as on seventy thousand.

"My fate is in your hands Claudia. Choose—and

choose with deliberation, decide for yourself and for me. I have booked my berth on a Messageries steamer that will not leave Marseilles till the thirtieth of this month; so you will have plenty of time for thought. Write to me before the twentieth, dearest girl, and tell me to come to you. By that time we shall have been married nearly three months, though you are only my bride of a honeymoon. Tell me that you are something more than my bride—my wife until death part us.

"Ever your fond and faithful husband, near or far,
"WILLIAM MURRAY."

She kissed the words "fond and faithful husband." She cried over his letter, and wore it next her heart all day, and laid it in a secret drawer of her most precious jewel-box at night; but she held to her own opinion. An obstinate devil was master of her troubled mind. She would not bow to a husband's rule. It was she who ought to have the dominion, by the divine right of woman's love. He had called her Cleopatra, and she wanted to be his empress, to set her foot upon his neck, to bend him to her will, and make him think as she thought.

She answered his letter coldly, recapitulating her claims, her rights, the justice of her cause. She would go to Africa with him if he would let her. She would work with him there, and would cheerfully endure hardships to hear of which had made her blood run cold; but she would not declare herself his wife. She would have her hut apart; and they would meet as wedded lovers in secret, in the deep of night, when all the world was still.

On those terms would she go with him, not otherwise.

His answer was a single line.

"Alas, those terms can never be mine. Farewell."

CHAPTER XX.

CLAUDIA was ill, really ill; but she was deaf to Mary's entreaties, and would not hear of calling in the local doctor.

"Can he cure a mind diseased?" she exclaimed fretfully, when Mary teased her. "Change of scene will cure me better than doctor's stuff. We will go to Skepton to-morrow."

They went, and this time Claudia deferred to conventionality and took a footman. She went to her rooms at the works, and Mary and the footman waited upon her, with the help of the caretaker who had charge of the rooms, and whose business it was to keep them in such order that Miss Rayner should find them ready, come when she would.

She thought that her kingdom would occupy her mind, and almost cure her grief. December was half gone, and she counted the days till the sailing of the steamer from Marseilles. She tried to interest herself in things that had been her delight, but she was ill, and nothing pleased her. It was the old malady, the disgust of life, that she had felt after her mother's death; but this time the disgust of life was physical as well as mental. She hated everything, even her meals, which were delicate and carefully served, and which she sent away untasted. All life had become hateful. She sat alone in evenings that seemed endless, and cried over a book that she had no power to read. The lines swam before eyes that were blinded by tears.

"I shall be better to-morrow," she told Mary.

"If you are not I shall go and fetch the doctor."

Claudia turned upon her in a fury.

"If you dare do such a thing you shall leave me in an hour, and I will never see you again."

And then, touched by Mary's piteous face, she said:

"We will start for Italy next week, and I will see a doctor in Paris, if that will satisfy you."

"I don't think you ought to wait so long."

"Nonsense; we shall be there in a week."

Mary submitted. She loved her mistress too well to hazard dismissal. She was diplomatic, watched and waited. After all, she did not apprehend danger of serious illness, but she foresaw trouble, and wondered how her mistress would meet it.

Claudia had to brace her nerves for an interview with her junior partners, Algernon and Theodore. They were in high spirits, so jubilant about the things they had to tell her, the improvements, the expansion, that they took very little notice of her looks.

Expansion—that was one of their favourite words. Trade had been increasing by leaps and bounds. America might try to shut them out, but America could not do without them. Belgium could not do without them. France was a grand customer. From the Colonies, even from Germany, the demand was on the upward grade. The name of Rayner bulked larger than ever in the iron trade of the world.

Thus and thus spoke Theodore, who was more enterprising than his brother, though no less practical and hard-headed. It seemed to Claudia that something of her father's eager spirit had been transmitted to Theodore, who had grown up in association with his uncle. There was the same ardour, the same confidence as to results, and the same sympathy with those units whose labour was so large a factor in the prosperity of the iron town.

Theodore's bold imagination beheld a perspective of infinite progress, marching step by step with the development of electricity. He had visions of smokeless factories, a smokeless town, electric power-houses where the moving force should come from waterfalls among the barren hills fifty miles away.

"The future of Skepton may show progress as great in the next decade as in the thirty years of my uncle's rule, when one after another the old methods gave place to the new. We may look back at the works as they are to-day and laugh at our old-fashioned system, our antediluvian machinery. Every detail will be different; every crank and piston-rod will be a new invention. The twentieth century is a rapid mover. The eighty-mile-an-hour motor is typical of the age."

"And you are quite satisfied with your income from the business?" Claudia asked.

"You bet. I'm going to be married early in the spring. You remember Daisy Woolfield—pretty little girl with flaxen hair?"

Claudia faintly recalled the image of a small person with pink cheeks and prominent blue eyes, and she said everything that was expected of her.

"There's plenty of money in the family. The Woolfields are in the shipping trade at North Shields, but Daisy's mother is a widow. There are only two daughters, and Daisy will have between five and six hundred a year; but that didn't weigh with me. From the time I became a partner in Rayner's I could afford to marry her if she hadn't a sixpence. It was the lass, not the brass, that I wanted."

He invited Claudia to go with him to see the villa he had bought, within a mile of the town. He assured her that it was the most perfect thing in the way of medium-sized houses, and that he had only to make the garden.

"It won't be much to look at compared with your gardens at Daneborough," said Theodore; and Claudia paled at the thought of the place she loved, remembering that Theodore and his people might have been in possession of those romantic gardens to-day had she obeyed her husband.

Had she obeyed him! Obedience was included in her marriage vow. To love, to honour and obey; She was a rebellious wife, estranged from the husband who was to have been hers till death parted them; and for the sake of sordid things. There were

moments, brief flashes of light, in which the wrong she was doing showed sharp and clear ; but in the next minute the evil spirit of pride and self-will, that especially feminine spirit of revolt, the revolt of the weak against the strong, regained the mastery, and she felt that she would rather sacrifice happiness than submit to injustice.

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She drove about the town and suburbs, visiting her people. She wanted to get vivid impressions, to renew her old delight in her kingdom ; but the freshness was gone out of everything. Her pleasure in the perfection of that model community was now only a languid pleasure. Indeed her own dejection mixed a note of sadness with all she saw, with all she heard. It was nothing that the death-rate of Skepton was the lowest in any manufacturing town, when twice she found herself in a house of death—a very old man, a very young child, deaths that hardly counted from the practical point of view ; but she went back to her carriage disheartened and unhappy. Only to hear of death saddened her.

Again she found herself shuddering at the monotonous streets, and pitying the people who had to live in square stone boxes of unvarying pattern. At the hospitals, the sight of suffering, the pallid faces, the wasted hands, depressed her. She could no longer take delight in the perfect arrangements, the all-pervading sense of comfort. She visited the old whose working days were done, the orphans whose lives were beginning ; but her pride in her father's provision for the well-being of his dependents was dead. After all, these benefits were the least that a man could give to the people who had given him their lives, or who were going to give them. After all, this life of toil was but a civilised slavery ; and it was a small thing that the slave-owner should provide for the helpless among his slaves.

The zest had gone out of Skepton. Claudia stayed there for less than a week ; but she could not escape from one family meal at Vale Hall.

Ruby and Veronica appeared on the morning after her arrival, bringing an affectionate little note from her aunt, inviting her to dinner.

"I know how you like to be alone at the works when you come on one of your flying visits," wrote Mrs. Rayner, "so I don't urge you to dine with us every evening, as we should all like you to do, but you must at least spare us one evening, and I am naming Saturday, as that will give time to ask a few people, and get up a cosy little party."

Claudia pleaded that she hated dinner-parties, and asked to be allowed to lunch with the family on Saturday, when her uncle would be at home early in the afternoon. It would be a good-bye visit, as she was going to London by the afternoon express to make arrangements for wintering in Italy.

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The whole family were at the Saturday luncheon, including her uncle, who came home earlier than usual to make much of his niece.

"We see you so seldom that I can't afford to miss an opportunity," he said kindly, as he took his place at table with Claudia on his right hand.

Everybody was there. Theodore's Daisy, and Ruby's Harold, now on the brink of matrimony, and two Miss Porters, staying company, from the suburbs of Bradford, upon the elder of whom Algernon was rumoured to be "sweet." That was the expression.

"He's been sweet upon her for ages." Veronica said; "but we don't know whether it will ever come off. Of course he can afford to marry now."

The Miss Porters belonged to the society in which everybody owns a chimney, and their father's was a good and warrantable chimney, that smoked all the year round for the production of woollen fabrics. There were slack seasons when other woollen chimneys ceased to smoke; but Mr. Porter's engines throbbed and plunged in their leathern harness all the year round.

The family had assembled in order to feast their eyes upon Claudia, who looked pale and weary, but

who talked and smiled, and was gracious to everybody, answering everybody's questions about her winter in Italy.

"I wonder at your choosing Bordighera," Ruby said, "for I have been told it is deadly dull."

The elder Miss Porter had spent three months there with poor mamma, and could vouch for the dulness. There was positively nothing doing. Even San Remo was better, because there were balls, and Italian officers who waltzed divinely.

"If I am bored at Bordighera I shall go on to Rome."

"Ah, that would be too delightful!"

Harold Luscombe had heard a lot about Rome. Hunting, races, theatres; plenty to do.

Mathew asked Claudia if she was going to take a courier.

"Oh, no, I am going to no out-of-the-way places. There will be no travelling worth thinking about. I shall spend two or three days in Paris."

"To buy frocks?" interjected Ruby. "I wish you'd try my woman."

"And I shall go straight on to Bordighera, where I may stay all the winter."

"You won't be able to stick it," said Luscombe.

"But you'll take a man-servant of some kind, I hope?" said her uncle.

"An English servant would be no use. I shall engage a travelling footman in Paris."

"You'll have to be very careful about his character."

"I shall go to agents in the Rue Castiglione, who used to do things for my mother, well-known people."

The questioning ceased after this, and in the drawing-room Ruby appropriated her cousin, and gave her an elaborate inventory of her trousseau, the more important items of which were being made in Paris.

"By a first-class woman who made a frock for me three years ago, when Al and I did an Easter week at the Continental. She kept my pattern, and the sample frock she sent home fits me as if I had been poured into it."

Ruby's figure, which was composed of angles, did not suggest the pouring process.

She could talk of nothing but her approaching espousals. Harold had been doing wonders in his profession, and the pater was adding ten thousand to Uncle Ralph's legacy, all strictly tied up, so they would be quite comfortably off. They had found a sweet little house in Montagu Square, near everything nice, and less than ten minutes' walk from Park Lane.

"And I hope you're not going to cut me when I'm settled," she said. "If you were anything like a cousin you'd launch me in your own set."

"My dear Ruby, I have no set. I never had a set. I used to go wherever my mother wanted me to go, but I was tired of it all after my second season. I have not the talent for society."

"Then I suppose I shall hardly ever see you when we are living within half a mile of each other," said Ruby, with an offended air.

"My dear Ruby, I will try to be a good neighbour, but I never give parties. I am almost a recluse."

"A recluse in the White House! It does seem a pity. If it were my house, and I had half your income, I would make London ring with my parties. I would try to imitate Aunt Magdalen, who was a perfect hostess."

"My mother liked entertaining. She would have lived longer, perhaps, if she had not given so much of herself to society."

Tears sprang to her eyes as she spoke of her mother, of whom she could seldom think without recalling the tragedy of that untimely end—beautiful, admired, beloved, and receiving the death-sentence at an hour when life had lost none of its charms.

Ruby's talk of the White House was getting on her cousin's nerves. It realised the picture that had been in her mind so often of late. Her cousins at the White House, scaring London by the crudeness of their hospitalities, piling Pelion on Ossa, overdoing everything, irritating and offending the people they wanted to please. Claudia was a creature of the world in which she had been reared, and she thought that the finer social arts could only be acquired in the slow and gradual education of race.

Ruby would be completely happy in Montagu Square, where her sisters would visit her in the height of the London season, and look with dazzled eyes and satisfied minds at the splendour of a tiara night at the opera, and the varieties of raiment at Church Parade, and the notabilities on the lawn at Sandown, and would go back to Skepton puffed up with their knowledge of the "smart set."

Transplant them to Park Lane, and they would die of the failures and disappointments in the struggle to push their way into the charmed circle that every parvenu pines to enter. They would expire in the rarefied air of social heights, as weakling travellers sink breathless on Himalayan peaks.

Claudia went across the room to talk to her aunt, who sat placid and benignant in her large arm-chair by the fire, and slipped into a seat beside her. She admired a bowl of chrysanthemums on a book-table.

"You ought to have seen the greenhouses, Claudia," Mrs. Rayner said, with supreme content. "We have a new head gardener, and I think he is doing wonders."

"You have such fine gardens."

"Yes, I remember your grandfather walking about with the two boys, Mathew and your father, ordering the men, when the gardens were being laid out. I was only a tot, and I never thought I should marry Mat, and come to live in the big new house. The two families were great friends, and the boys used to come to our juvenile parties. The Christmas-tree wouldn't have been a tree without Ralph and Mat."

It touched Claudia to hear of her father as a little boy; and the poignant regret of last year came back to her as an aching pain, the regret at not having cared enough for him, and not having won his love.

"If he had known me better he would never have made that iniquitous will," she thought. "He would have known that there was no fear of madness in my case."

And then she brought her mind back to her aunt, who sat smiling at her in a plethoric silence, waiting

for somebody else to carry on the conversation. That little speech about her childish reminiscences had been a burst of talk for Mrs. Rayner, and she required a minute's rest.

"You are very fond of Vale Hall," Claudia said gently; "you would not like to leave it."

"My dear, if this house were to be burnt down, or any other dreadful thing were to happen to turn us out of Vale Hall, it would be my death. I don't believe I could get over it. There's not a room in the house, not a corner in any of the landings, where I couldn't find my way in the dark; there's not a press in the store-room where I couldn't put my hand upon anything I wanted in the dark. I remember when I was a growing girl the phrenologists said I had the organ of order well developed, and I have taken delight in arranging everything in this house as it should be. There's not one of our servants that I haven't trained myself, so it isn't strange if they know my ways."

"Now the mater has mounted her Early Victorian hobby, she'll never stop," said Veronica, who had come to join in the conversation.

"Ah, well, we shall see how you young ones manage your houses, and if you can keep your servants."

"We shan't keep them for ever as you and the pater do. We shan't wait for them to better themselves, as they call it. It will be our look-out to better them."

"My aunt has been telling me how fond she is of Vale Hall."

"Oh, she's a dreadful stay-at-home. She'd let us all rust if we'd let her. We had to give up our London season this year because the mater fancied herself too ill for the trouble of the move."

"My dear, there was no fancy about it. You know I have a weak heart."

Veronica expressed a smiling incredulity about weak hearts, and Claudia's fly being announced at this moment, the conversation resolved itself into leave-taking.

"You must let us know where we are to send our letters. I shall have lots to tell you about the

works," Theodore said, as he took his cousin to her carriage.

"The Post Office, Bordighera, will do for some time. I have not made up my mind about the hotel."

"I should think you could have all the hotels for your exclusive use at this time of year. I was at Nice once in November, and the place gave me the horrors. The mice used to run about the *salle à manger* while we were at dinner—only me and two or three French bagmen. Good-bye."

CHAPTER XXI.

When the Christmas turkey and the Christmas beef at Vale Hall were vying with each other in size and excellence, and when all Skepton was gay and gaudy with gas and Chinese lanterns, and all the shops were brimming over with food or finery, all the town uproarious with cheerful Yorkshire voices; and when excursion trains from smaller towns and villages were pouring visitors into the place, and all the walls were placarded with announcements of pantomime and play, and entertainments of every kind, Claudia was strolling slowly along the sunlit sands of a watering-place on the Mediterranean.

She was at Alassio. She had stayed at Bordighera only long enough to explore the neighbourhood, and to discover that the place was a favourite resort of English people; whereupon she had gone to Alassio, where she had a suite of rooms at the quieter of the two chief hotels, and with no companion but old Mary and two or three hundred of the best books. She meant to remain till the spring, when she would move further South.

She had come to Alassio unannounced, and she kept herself aloof from the few other visitors. At Alassio she was not Miss Rayner, but Madame Rayne, and people knew no more about her than that she was by way of being an invalid, and that she took her afternoon airings in a bath-chair pushed by a Swiss footman.

She was handsome, and had a distinguished air. She was evidently well off, since she had maid and man-servant, occupied the best rooms in the hotel,

and dined in her salon, which everybody knew meant expense. She went for long drives, always with her homely little elderly maid, in the best carriage that Alassio could provide, and that carriage was retained for her special use.

She dressed always in black, and her husband was said to be travelling in Africa—no doubt after big game.

She was admired for her beauty and revered for her wealth, but the English inmates of her hotel considered her stand-offish and disagreeable, and resented her exclusiveness.

One good-natured spinster suggested an excuse in some recent loss which had shadowed her young life with sorrow. Was she not always dressed in black?

"Not mourning," said another. "My dear Miss Tremlett, the fact is obvious. She is some French wine merchant's wife—one of the champagne people at Rheims, perhaps, who are all inordinately rich—and we are not good enough for her."

She walked on the beach alone, and she sat in the woods sketching or reading, while the monotonous days ebbed away, bringing her nearer, by the lapse of every hour, to an unknown, unthinkable trouble.

A great affliction had come upon her, something for which, in her haughty aloofness from the common herd and their common way of thinking and talking, she had been curiously unprepared. Another wife of six-and-twenty might have feared, or hoped, this which was coming upon her; but in her ardent romantic love for the husband of her choice there had been no domestic instincts, no vision of possible maternity. Their union had been mind with mind, spirit with spirit, and although love had been impassioned, it had been a love that soared to the empyrean and took no thought of earthly considerations.

And now she, the wife without a husband, knew that she was to be a mother.

Old Mary had been mistress of the situation from the time they crossed the Channel. A distinguished physician had been consulted in Paris, an English

doctor had been found at Alassio. Madame Rayne had been watched over by medical care. She had nothing to do but live her lonely life remote from everyone who knew her till the coming of summer.

Nothing else ?

Yes, there was an alternative. Twenty words cabled to Mombasa would bring her husband to her side. In a few weeks he would be there, her friend, her protector, loving and cherishing her, and the colour of her life would be changed. She had only to call to him, but she would not.

Neither altered health nor isolation had bent her will. She fretted and pined and hated her existence, but the spirit of revolt was unsubdued. It was for him to yield, not for her.

She had arrived at Marseilles just two hours too late to see him on board the steamer. She had driven to the highest point on the Cornice Road, and had seen the big ship moving swiftly, the last gleam of the white smoke as it melted into the blue. What good could have come of a meeting ? A wild desire had seized her while she was in Paris—just to see him, to wind her arms round his neck, and in one long kiss tempt him to surrender, just once more to try her Cleopatra lures and bend a strong man to her will.

She knew that she would have failed. Standing up in her carriage and watching the faint white cloud fading on the horizon, she was almost glad that she had been too late.

" I should only have humbled myself to a tyrant," she thought ; " and perhaps he would have guessed——"

He might have guessed the affliction that had befallen her, an affliction that seemed to her almost a disgrace. It took the romance out of her love-story. Nothing more commonplace could have happened to a shopkeeper's wife.

Yes, that was the ship. She had enquired at an office in the port, and then had driven to this highest point upon the road, in order to watch the last fleck of white in the sunlit sky.

She drew a long breath, and her eyes filled with tears when that faint smoke-cloud vanished.

He was gone—gone for all the rest of her life ; gone to a land of danger and hardship ; gone to spend himself and be spent, for savages who might worship him to-day as a god, and murder him to-morrow as a devil.

CHAPTER XXII.

It was April, warm and vivid as an English June, though with the possibility of sudden changes, snow-storms and capricious weather, even in Italy. But for the moment it was as lovely as an English mid-summer.

Claudia had turned her back upon Alassio, and upon all the hotel visitors whom her isolation had offended. Indeed, there were but a few of those injured persons remaining when she left the hotel, for the Alassio season had waned, and an unearthly quiet had fallen upon the visitors' quarter of the little town.

Claudia was on her way to Spezia, where she meant to stay for a few days at the Croce di Malta, while she drove about the neighbourhood in search of a villa in which she might spend the summer. She knew Spezia of old, in leisurely journeys between Rome and Genoa with her mother. She knew that it was a place where the King and Queen of Italy were sometimes summer visitors ; and her doctor at Alassio had told her that she might stay in the neighbourhood with comfort through the summer. The villa of her choice must be upon a hill overhanging the gulf, and there must be a garden with abundant shade, and olive woods adjacent, where one might sit or wander unseen, far from the haunts of mankind. She remembered having seen white houses in delicious gardens on the hills between Spezia and Lerici.

* * * * * *

She was at Genoa, in the rush and turmoil of a

gigantic and labyrinthine station, where every possible means seemed to be employed to impede departure and make travelling troublesome, and it was only after the frantic efforts of the Swiss footman, assisted by Mary, who had the art of subjugating porters and custom-house clerks by sheer Britannic force and without a syllable of their language, that a *coupé* had been secured for Madame Rayne and her two attendants.

She had a second female attendant now, a nice-looking person of about thirty years of age, dressed in black, and who, without wearing any kind of uniform, had "trained nurse" writ large upon her face and figure. The quiet seriousness of countenance, the calm movements, the spotlessness of linen collar and cuffs, could belong only to the nursing sisterhood.

It was here that Claudia had her first encounter with a London acquaintance, and that the person of all others she would have least wished to meet.

Sylvester Treswick, dapper and effeminate, in a pastel grey *complet*, white linen gaiters showing daintily above Russia leather boots, delicate doeskin gloves and Panama hat, came sauntering along the platform, peering into every carriage with little eyes and large eyeglass. He peered and passed on, till he came in front of Claudia's *coupé*, when he gave a jump that was almost a pirouette, before he came to the carriage door, snatched off a glove, and lifted up a little limp hand, which Claudia reluctantly touched. It could not be said that she shook hands with him, only that she did not push his proffered hand away with open violence.

"My dear Miss Rayner, what an enchanting surprise. But, alas! you are in the departing train. Whither, oh whither bound, dear lady?"

"To Pisa."

"Deadly dull. A leaning tower that one has known from childhood in seaside lodgings, under a glass shade. A leaning tower, and nothing more. Yes, there is a cemetery, where some prophetic painter has depicted Napoleon in Tophet. Don't go to Pisa."

Claudia smiled, disregarding a speech that seemed not to call for a reply.

"Are you going to London?" she asked, without even a pretence of interest.

"To Paris—and when Paris palls—to my *taudis* in Jermyn Street."

And then, after peering into the *coupé*, from his perch on the step, he murmured, "How comfortable you look, with your two maids, and here is your footman," as Oberland Herman approached with his arms full of books and newspapers. "What it is to be the rich Miss Rayner! Have you taken all the hotel at Pisa, or only a wing?"

"Had you not better get down before the train moves?"

"It will not move for ages. The luggage is not in, not more than half of it. Shall I run and help your man?" looking after Herman.

"No, thank you; he is quite able to manage things."

"How wise of you to engage a foreigner. Your Park Lane giants would be useless *en voyage;* and these brutes have a knack of losing one's registered luggage nowadays. I heard you were wintering in Italy. At Bordighera, was it not?"

"I move from place to place."

"And after Pisa? Will you come home?"

"I have not made up my mind. I am not in a hurry to leave Italy."

"Surely you are not going to miss another season in London?"

"I never want to hear the word 'season' again, in London or anywhere else."

"You are looking far from well. Italy has bored you."

She looked at him with freezing indifference, and made no reply.

She was pale, and her eyes were haggard, and her face was thin and worn. She was wrapped in a grey velvet cloak with an ermine collar, too warm a wrap for an Italian April, or for this particular April day. A capricious climate might make a furred mantle necessary to-morrow.

"Can I get you anything—fruit, or any more papers? I see you have plenty of flowers."

"Plenty of everything, thanks. Good-bye."

The word of import, "Partenza," had not been spoken, but Treswick felt himself dismissed.

"A rivederci," he murmured, and dropped off his perch, and ran along the platform to the spot where the registered luggage was being tumbled into the van.

He was just in time to distinguish a huge dark-green trunk, strapped with leather in the most expensive way that leather can be employed in trunk-making, and was just able to read the address:

Madame Rayne, Croce di Malta, Spezia.

"Madame Rayne—only one little letter missing," he mused. "Now I shouldn't be surprised if Madame Rayne meant Miss Rayner—a mistake of the foreign footman. And not Pisa, but Spezia—a mistake of his mistress."

He stood bare-headed as the train moved slowly away, and he saw Claudia leaning back languidly, with closed eyes, unconscious of his parting salutation.

"She looks very ill," he thought, "and there is a subtle change in her—something mysterious."

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The villa was found spacious and airy, with balconies and loggia, and white walls that were seen from afar, dazzling in the sunshine, like a lighthouse. It stood on the crest of a hill from which the road dips sharply down to the little port of Lerici; a villa in a garden wrapped round with olive woods, darkly green, save where the wind turned the light leaves from green to grey. Such a garden would have been an elysium for happy souls; but earth has no paradise for a soul in pain, and a dull, aching sorrow held Claudia's spirit to the earth. Her thoughts could not rise above the path on which she walked with slow, sad footsteps, sometimes under a yellow canopy of banksia roses, sometimes in long colonnades of oranges and lemons, where the pale gold and the red gold showed among the darkness of clustering leaves, as the fruit ripened day by day with the advancing season.

It was always summer. The Italian climate had no worse caprices that year than an occasional day or two of clouded skies and torrential rain—rain that seemed bent on destroying the gardens, but which left every flower and shrub more beautiful in the returning sunshine. The light, springy soil drank the flood and smiled with newly-opening flowers, soft green mosses, tender grass, the greensward of a single summer.

It was always summer from April to July, and for two days of cloud and rain there was a month of turquoise sky and turquoise sea, where the felucca sails flashed white or glowed crimson against the blue water. Claudia watched them from her hill-top garden, or from her orchard of golden fruit, where no ruthless dragon guarded the gate. She longed for her faithful terrier amidst these exquisite surroundings, but she had done what was best for her dog, rather than what was best for herself, in leaving that cherished companion at Daneborough, where everybody was fond of him.

His absence added a little more pain to the heart-ache she had suffered ever since parting from her husband.

The long days were full of weariness. She lay on a sofa in her garden through the sultry, sunlit afternoon, and towards evening she went down to the harbour with Mary and Nurse Wilson, and spent the twilight hours in a boat that she had hired for the season, with a skipper and four men.

These fishermen-sailors were the only people she talked with in her Italian home. They told her all about Lerici, and the people who lived there. One of them could tell her of his grandfather, who had died some years previously at ninety-six years of age, and who remembered the funeral pyre on the sea-shore, when the fragile form of the drowned poet was reduced to ashes, ardent mind to consuming flame, fire to fire, fitting end for him in whom the spirit was so pure a light, while the flesh counted for so little.

She liked to talk to them in their own language, interested even in their local terms of speech, their

faults of grammar and pronunciation. Almost all her reading had been Italian since she had been living at the villa—poets, philosophers, novelists, Fogazzaro, Verga, and d'Annunzio, that spirit of unspeakable sadness who echoed her own disgust of life, a spirit of despondency and gloom, mournful as Swinburne, hopeless as Shelley.

Those evening hours on the little yacht were the pleasantest in her sombre life. She could recline in her deck-chair, half buried in down pillows, drinking in the beauty of sky and earth, as they coasted towards Leghorn, or rounded the Capo da Venere, and sailed past Porto Fino, meeting the sunset. They could see Genoa the superb, glittering whitely far off upon her amphitheatre of hills, and the great ships going out to Venice or Alexandria.

Sometimes they dined on board, old Mary arranging everything to perfection, a delicate meal, essentially feminine in its details—the lightest wine, sparkling waters, fruit and pastry, airy food at which the sailors smiled as they finished the feast, ekeing out those delicacies with a big dish of polenta.

Claudia felt the disgust of life less acutely in those evening hours. The physical disgust at least was abated by the cool breeze from sea and hills, the soothing ripple of the calm waters, and that divine panorama of sunset and mountains. But in the long hot days life was hardly endurable, even in the perfumed shade of garden and orchard. Everything disgusted her, things that to other people were all joy.

"Oh, the sickening stench of the roses!" she cried out one tropical afternoon, overpowered by the perfume of the Safrano roses that canopied her sofa.

The oppression of those long summer days made studious reading impossible. She had to put aside her serious books, the books that were teaching her to think. She could only read a novel, those light Sicilian stories of Verga's, or Matilda Serao's vivid life-studies; and even then the volume was apt to slip from her languid hand, while she sat gazing at the long vista of gleaming fruit and dark leaves, a

dusky distance dwindling to a point where a spot of blue sea glittered like a jewel.

She had too much time for thought—not the kind of thought she had hoped to cultivate from her study of the philosophers and biologists, not the thought of abstract and universal things, but thought that turned inward, self-centred thought that was almost passion; a heart-sick brooding upon love that had been and never could be again.

How cruel he had been to leave her—how cruel! After those hours at Grasmere when she had fondly believed that he was her slave, and would do anything in the world to please her, the slave had turned despot, hard as adamant.

Sometimes, remembering how he had parted with her, she thought her love was dead, that she could spend the rest of her life, almost happily, without him. But in the next minute her imagination was following him in that unknown world, a solitary wanderer, travelling on foot from mission station to mission station, tramping under a torrid sun, crossing vast black swamps, where malaria hung like a dark canopy betwixt earth and sky, a lion-haunted wilderness, hemmed round with unknown enemies, in danger of death from man and beast. That was the fate to which she had sent the lover she had followed and sought, winning him by sheer audacity, almost against his will, certainly against his convictions.

She recalled that triumphant morning in Castle Street, a time of agitation and emotions too deep for words, and how she had dared to put her arms about his neck and bend his face to hers, as she told him: "Now you will have to marry me."

She had ventured as few women would have ventured, and then for a sordid reason she had cast away the treasure she had won at such sacrifice of womanly pride, such risk of shame. When she stood before him in the morning sunshine, on the threshold of his door, had she not cause enough to fear that he would think lightly of her? She had hazarded even his good opinion, only to call him husband,

and then for the sake of meaner things she had let him go.

And then the thought of those mean things would come into her mind, not to be put away, an obsession. She would not have her cousins at the White House, or at Daneborough. She would not surrender her authority and influence in Skepton. They were things that were almost as dear as life. It was true that her last visit to the iron town had been a disappointment. The joy had gone out of everything. The kindly faces, the quaint provincial speech, had charmed her no more. But that had only been because she was ill. The charm would come back to her by and by, and she would again be happy in going about among her people. She meant to do great things for them when she went back to Yorkshire—great things in education, great things for the pleasantness of their lives. Her father's methods had been perfect of their kind, but strictly utilitarian. She meant to bring the element of beauty into their homes. Somehow those long, monotonous streets were to be made gay with new colour and new forms. Her town should put on the laughing air of an Italian village. Skepton should blossom as the rose.

These were her trivial and happier thoughts. Sometimes she tried to realise what her life might be like if she had submitted to the injustice of her father's will. She thought of her beggarly seven hundred a year, and how her husband had told her she was to spend it all upon herself.

"What must he have thought of me when he wrote those words? To spend my money upon clothes and flowers and books! A vicar's wife in a rural parish, sickness and want in half the cottages by which I passed in my daily walk, and I to be daintily clad, pampered with flowers and books, while my husband's parishioners were starving."

She remembered a vicar's wife she had visited in a village within an afternoon drive of Daneborough, a poor parish, a tumble-down vicarage, with damp-stained walls, a rotten thatched roof, and a neglected garden; a vicarage that had been built cheaply and

designed with a fond pretence of the picturesque, and which, after thirty years' use, was little better than a ruin.

The vision of house and garden, the wife's careworn face and slatternly clothes, the children's dirty pinafores and unkempt heads, had flashed back upon her mind when she read Murray's letter with its promise of an ideal life in a rural vicarage. It was like a man, to have no idea of the cost of things, and to believe that a home could be made happy and beautiful without money. Yet in no place were ample means more essential than in the home of a parish priest, whose house ought to be a centre of beneficence, the open door to which the poor might always come for help in their hour of need, with no fear of going away empty.

Better to have been his companion in Africa, enduring hardships, face to face with peril and death, than to live in a poor parish and have to turn a deaf ear to the cry of want.

She remembered how the slatternly wife in the tumble-down vicarage had talked of sickness and distress in the cottages, and the hardship of not being able to help the sufferers.

She would not have minded African privations. The splendour of mountain and lake, the isolation, the intimate communion of life with the man she loved, would have made amends for everything; but once when she had talked of herself as the companion of his wanderings along untrodden paths, he had smiled at her fancy, and answered her as he might have answered a child.

Seven hundred a year! The class of people who lived upon such an income had never come within her knowledge. She could understand the lives of her iron-workers, and she could imagine those darker lives in London slums, where existence meant a long fight against hunger; but that middle-class life, in which seven hundred a year would perhaps count as a comfortable income, was more difficult of comprehension.

She knew the long suburban roads, houses detached

and semi-detached, houses in streets or houses in terraces, block after block, all with the same bay windows, the same cheap plate-glass and cheap Nottingham lace curtains, the same stucco ornamentation upon bad red brick, the same miserable front gardens that had more correctly been called dustbins. Myriads were living in such houses upon seven hundred a year.

Since she had been urged to give up her fortune she had taken some notice of the cost of her life, which she had previously disregarded. From the time she had left London money seemed to have poured through her hands in a golden stream. Sovereigns and twenty-franc pieces had slipped away like counters in a round game. On the journey, in Paris, at Bordighera, even at Alassio, gold had flowed like water. Her habits of life were curiously expensive, while without all outward show of expense. She took no wine, yet her hotel bills were enormous, for all her meals were served in her own rooms, and at her own hours. At Alassio, where the table d'hôte dinner was at seven, she chose to dine at half-past eight, and her chicken and salad counted as a special dinner, her dish of asparagus as a particular luxury. Astute hotel-keepers had scented her wealth, and adjusted their charges accordingly. Every detail of her life at Lerici was costly. Her villa, her gardens, her yacht, her Italian servants. She was served like a princess, and she paid princely prices. The expenditure mattered nothing, but it strengthened her conviction that life must be intolerable without a large income.

"Is it possible for anyone to live more simply than I am living," she thought, as she looked through the counterfoils in her cheque book and wondered at the high figures and frequent cheques.

Large as her outlay was, it counted for little against her income, and on sending for her pass-book at midsummer, she found that she had about eighty thousand pounds at her bank. Money from Skepton, dividends from her father's invested capital, and rents from Daneborough, had poured into her account since that large gift of nearly a year ago.

She wrote at once to James Lanford, and told him

that she was ready to hand over sixty thousand pounds to the Michael Rayner Endowment.

"I always meant to make it a hundred thousand," she said; "but I find I can do more, and hope eventually to increase the fund to a quarter of a million."

Not once had it occurred to her, that by investing this money on her own account, she might add two thousand a year to her pittance of seven hundred; nor did it occur to her that she had no power to make a gift of money that belonged of right to Mathew Rayner.

The Saffords had never shown remarkable capacity for dealing with money, but rather a talent for making away with it; and Lady Louisa may have been right when she declared that her niece was more a Safford than a Rayner.

After leaving Alassio Claudia's letters from England were addressed to her at Spezia, at the Croce di Malta, where she had made arrangements with the porter, who was to send on her letters, according to her instructions, but was to give no information to any one who should happen to make enquiries about her movements.

"I have come to Italy in order to get away from tiresome people—*seccatori*—and I don't want any of them to hunt me out," she said, and the porter, who had been lavishly tipped in the past and counted on future benefactions, laid himself at her feet. Letters addressed to Miss Rayner should be sent to Madame Rayne. The porter affected to perceive nothing mysterious or questionable in that difference.

She had written from time to time to her Aunt Louisa, who was more insistent in concern for her welfare than any other of her relations. Her own letters to the kind aunt were brief, and gave no particulars. She was going from place to place. She had hired a yacht, and was exploring, making no plans in advance, but Spezia was her head-quarters. Letters sent there would always reach her. She sent instructions to her servants at Daneborough, careful directions as to the care of her dogs; and the famous dog doctor of Pimlico was to be telegraphed for at

the least hint of illness. She sent orders about her Daneborough dependents and pensioners. She forgot nothing, in spite of the languor and weariness of those summer days in which the lightest task was a burden.

On one of those sultry, overpowering days there came a surprise, a surprise that set her heart beating—a long letter from her husband. She had not hoped to hear from him again after that one line of farewell. She kissed and cried over the letter before she read it; indeed, the rushing tears almost blinded her, and it was some time before she could see to read the neat, small writing on thin paper.

He wrote almost as an ordinary friend might have written—calmly, pleasantly, telling her of his work and of his surroundings. He was greatly rejoiced at the progress that had been made since his experience of past years; rejoiced to see the churches that had risen up where the devil worshippers had performed their ghastly rites, where, on the death of a king, nine of his living subjects had been buried with him, lest he should feel lonely in the darkness beyond the grave. From savage superstitions, devil worship, ancestor worship, mutilations, cruelties of every kind, these children of the desert and the wilderness had turned with joyful faith to the gospel of love, and only the deep-rooted prejudice of the irreligious could deny the good that had been done in that dark land by Christian missions—Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Nonconformist and Roman Catholic.

He had stayed for some time among his old people by Lake Nyassa, and then had travelled up country and across the great lake to Uganda, now a thriving colony, from which centre of civilisation and progress he hoped to wander far upon untrodden paths, going where no white man carrying the gospel light had gone before him.

"Whatever may happen to me, I shall not feel that my life has been wasted; nor can I be completely unhappy while I am able to share in the work that is gradually changing Equatorial Africa from a land

of darkness to a land of light ; but from the hour when your face looked at me for the last time from the moving train, all personal interests and joys were over and done with for me ; and when the end shall come, soon or late, I can lay down the burden of this mortal life without one pang of regret.

"Had I been a free man when I met you, a man who had never been called to labour for the enlightenment of his fellow-men, you might have found me more difficult to deal with ; for you must know that as your husband I have rights that I might assert, among them, the right to inform your uncle of our marriage, and so to put an end to a position which is so unworthy of you that I dare not use the words that would justly define its dishonour.

"I have refrained from any such assertion of right, first, because I could not dismiss the hope that you would take the honourable course of your own free will ; and next, because having such good use for my life here, I can accept the bitter alternative—can leave the wife I love to be happy with the things she values more than my affection or her own honour. I had one fond hope, which time has killed, the hope that you would tell me to come to you ; the hope that you might have special need of a husband's love and care. Well, it is only one more disappointment.

"The Mission House in Uganda is the only address I can give for letters, and it may be long before any letter so addressed can reach me, as I shall be for the most part beyond the ken of the native postmen.

"With love that neither time nor distance nor adverse circumstances can change,

"Your husband,

"WILLIAM MURRAY."

A wanderer in untrodden paths, in that savage land, among cannibals and wild beasts, subject to all the horrors of malarial fever, or even to that mysterious disease whose deadly symptoms he had described in his stories of suffering and death, the fatal sleeping sickness. He had told her that the disease had been

rarely, if ever, known to attack a European, but the "if ever" was enough to make her cold with fear, for she knew that the regions in which he would be a wanderer were the haunts of that mysterious malady, earth-born, a poisonous exhalation from a tainted soil. Lying in the soft, sweet air, under her canopy of roses, in a land where everything on which the eye rested was a thing of beauty, she conjured up the vision of that terrific continent whose very vastness caused a thrill of fear. Again and again in their long evenings at Grasmere, she had made him describe his African experiences, his hair-breadth escapes by land and water, the hurricane in the forest, the sudden squall on the lake when the "dug-out" pitched and foundered in the trough of waves that ran high as a stormy ocean, moments of deadly peril when he had narrowly escaped the doom of Maples and Hall, those two bright young lives untimely cut short in the midst of successful labours. He had tried to give her only the bright aspect of the African missionary's life, the quaintness and drolleries of a people who were like grown-up children, the dawn of intellect in dark minds, the love and gratitude, curiously expressed, but pathetic even when mixed with comedy that touched upon broad farce. He would have told her only of things pleasant and facetious, but she was insatiable, and she constrained him to tell her of difficulties and dangers, moments when he looked death in the face, and when the chance that brought rescue for him and his comrades was little short of a miracle.

"You are never going back," she told him; "or if ever you do I am going with you, to travel step by step at your side, to share every danger."

She remembered how she had said this, sitting with her elbows on the table, where the map of Equatorial Africa lay stretched out, and where he had been tracing his wanderings, with pencil dots here and there, to mark the stages of his journeys, while her eyes devoured the strong, grave face, worshipping her hero.

"You are like Paul," she said. "The Church has made him a saint, but he was no greater than you," a

speech that brought sudden laughter into the serious face.

How long ago it all seemed—those evenings of exquisite bliss; the perfect union of spirit with spirit; the tender confidences between two minds that were for evermore to be as one.

Life of intense delight that had lasted only for the waxing and the waning of a moon! They had seen the new moon reflected upon Rydal as Wordsworth had so often seen it. They had watched its rise evening after evening, later and later, as the silver sickle changed to a golden shield. They had seen the dwindling of the golden disc, but even that waning glory outlasted their union, and it was from her lonely room at Daneborough that Claudia watched the moon in her last quarter, watched and remembered how she had seen the same waning moon as she stood in the porch, folded in her lover's arms, on the night before her wedding, when they had told each other that there was to be no more parting.

How long ago it all seemed as she lay under her rose canopy and conjured up the vision of his life, while she was dying of ennui in a land of exquisite beauty. She watched the little fleet of fishing boats sailing home in the sunset, the castle on the height, the busy harbour, and Garibaldi's statue in the public place, all bathed in golden flame, and she thought of the rough open boats on the tempestuous lake, the naked rowers straining at their oars in a race against death.

Her depression increased after the reading of Murray's letter, and Nurse Wilson, a woman of superior training and great experience, began to be seriously alarmed about her. She no longer spent her evening hours on the yacht, she no longer made an occasional expedition to Spezia in the roomy landau to enquire for letters, or to sit in her carriage watching the people while the band played in the public garden. She would not leave her garden and orchard, but lay on her sofa day after day, pretending to read or to sleep, while her restless thoughts deepened in their gloom.

The trial that was coming upon her gave her no fear, but no star of hope shone across the darkness of woman's ordeal. For her, perhaps, it would be well if that ordeal brought death, an easy solution of the problem that she had been brooding upon of late amidst the scent of roses and orange blossom.

The maternal instinct seemed wanting in her nature. No child had ever come intimately into her life. Safford infants had been exhibited to her, one after another, all of them profoundly uninteresting, and all of them exactly alike. A baby for her meant a small, warm, red morsel of life, half smothered in lace and muslin, and smelling of violet powder, a thing she was afraid to touch lest she should drop it, and put an end to its existence. She had never had a child upon her lap, or a child's arms round her neck, though she had ministered abundantly to the needs of cottagers' children for miles round Daneborough, pitying the mothers for their burden of clinging babies, or troublesome brats of three or four years old, hanging at their skirts. She had been lavish in her benefactions; but except in the children's hospital, and the Orphanage at Skepton, her interest in childhood had been unawakened, and in those two institutions it had been the perfection of her father's arrangements that had appealed to her rather than the children for whom hospital and orphanage had been created.

* * * * * *

The ordeal was past. William Murray's wife had gone very near to the gates of death. The skilled nurse had trembled for her patient, the English doctor from Spezia had stayed day and night at the Villa in fear of a fatal issue. It was many weeks after the birth of her son before Claudia could sit among a pile of pillows and hold him in her arms for the first time, looking down at the small face through a mist of tears.

And then, in a moment, she knew that the maternal instinct was no longer wanting; that this child was not like any other child that her eyes had looked upon. She was a mother, and this was her son. A

flood of feeling rushed through her heart and brain, as she bent over the baby face, kissing it and trying to see her husband's likeness in the infant features, the small soft face, so utterly different from the man's strongly marked countenance. She smiled at her own foolishness in supposing that there could be any resemblance between the man who had lived and thought and worked for a quarter of a century of earnest effort, as a schoolboy and a student, as a teacher of men, and this living flower, perhaps no more sentient than the bells of the lilies that swung in the soft air.

And then she thought she saw the father's eyes looking at her through the eyes of his son.

His son—the child he had hoped for. His letter had told her of his disappointment. It had not entered into his mind that she would keep that knowledge from him. To her, until the child was laid in her arms, there had seemed no sweetness in the thought of motherhood, no realisation of the strengthening of the bond between herself and the husband she had renounced. Day by day, after those first hours of returning health, the strength of that bond was revealed to her.

"We are three now," she said to herself, as she watched the sleeping child. "We are a trinity of love—but oh, how divided! Will he ever look upon his son's face? Will he ever come back in life and health from the untrodden paths—from peril of men and beasts, flood and tempest, peril of drowning, peril of disease?"

She had ample leisure in which to recall the past and to dream of the future, in those days of uttermost weakness, when she was slowly recovering from the illness that had closely touched the boundary line of life. For more days and nights than she cared to recall she had been in the strange world of delirious dreams, now dark, now lurid, now depressed to the lowest depths of melancholia, now exalted in wild imaginings—believing herself no longer mortal, but a bodiless spirit among spirits, gazing with enraptured eyes upon the glories of a seventh heaven where he,

her saint and martyr, was leading her footsteps, guiding and protecting her in the company of the elect.

There was one vision that haunted her even in the languid hours of convalescence—the vision of a sunlit river flowing through a tropical forest where he and she were wandering hand in hand.

Health and strength came back very slowly. It was late in October, but the weather was exquisite, and there were hours of warm sunshine in which Claudia was able to lie on her sofa under the canopy of roses. The garden was the same; the roses were fewer but the same; yet everything in life was changed by the presence of one small living creature that lay in its fantastic cradle by the side of her sofa, or in rare and precious moments was allowed to lie in her lap, while old Mary watched anxiously over mother and child.

"I do wish you knew a little more about babies, Miss Claudia. You look at him so dazed like, as if you could hardly believe he's alive."

The trained nurse was as experienced in babies as in mothers, and the child throve in her care, while Mary waited upon her with devoted attention, and was proud of an approving word.

"I haven't forgotten that I was once in the nursery," she said. "I used to be allowed to hold Miss Claudia sometimes when the head nurse was in a good temper, and I helped to nurse her when she was shut up for three weeks with chicken-pox. I ought to know something about children."

The birth of her son made no immediate difference in Claudia's life. When she went back to England she would have to hide her treasure. He must live under another roof, and she would have to exercise discretion in all her relations with him. For the world he must be somebody's else child. Later, when he was two or three years old, she might adopt him. In her loneliness she might be forgiven that eccentricity, and by her contemptuous neglect of the great ones of the earth she had already established herself as an eccentric.

Nothing the strange Miss Rayner could do would be strange enough to astonish people. For a long time she had been accustomed to being told that she was a strange girl. She had rarely come in contact with her mother's relations without hearing as much, nay, more. Lady Delabole, presuming on her superior rank, had gone so far as to tell her that she was not quite a Safford, which was a deeper disgrace than strangeness.

The future, contemplated across her son's cradle, was dark and troubled. She had looked forward to his birth with dread, as something undesired that would add to the difficulties of her life. But now, though the future was fraught with perplexity, she would not have parted with him for worlds. From the hour he had been laid in her arms she knew that this child was the most precious thing in her life, more precious even than the husband she had loved with a romantic passion, and parted from in a storm of angry pride.

The time might come when for this morsel of humanity she might be willing to sacrifice all that she had held so obstinately. She could no longer answer for her own resolve.

To do right, as William Murray counted right, would be to make her child a pauper. As her adopted son he might be reared in surroundings that make life beautiful, educated by men of the highest mark, the elect of his country and his time, moulded by the influences that make good and great men, every natural gift developed, every lofty aspiration encouraged. Everywhere his portion in life might be of the best. At the University, in foreign travel, in love and in marriage.

And then while she was building her dream-palace, the dazzling picture was suddenly darkened by the memory of that other life on which gold had been lavished. The lad at Eton, the undergraduate at Christ Church, the sumptuous travelling in the long vacations—and the end of it all dust and ashes! Disappointment to the father, shipwreck for the son. Gold had not bought her brother the joy of life, or

saved him from despair and untimely death. Money could not do everything. There were phases in some lives when the enchanter's wand failed, when the magic went out of the successful man's millions, and when Midas was impotent as Lazarus. But although she knew how gold had failed her father in the paramount desire of his life, she wanted her son to be rich. He was to have all the good things that gold could buy —even if in order to possess them he had to forego all the sweets of paternal love, perhaps never to know his father, and never to call his mother by the fond motherly name. He might have to be known in boyhood as the rich Miss Rayner's adopted son, the creature of an idle woman's caprice ; but with manhood he would make his own path, as the star makes its track in the heavens. He would have genius. He would be great. The offspring of romantic love, of a man in his meridian of mental power, of a woman in the plenitude of strength and beauty, must needs be richly endowed. How could a child so born, the child of William Murray, fail to achieve greatness ?

She had been almost wavering in the early days of the child's life, while still weakened by her long illness ; but as the boy grew and throve her mind hardened. She put him before his father in her thoughts. She had somebody to live for, a new life to plan, and she was more than ever determined to keep her fortune, doubly precious now for the sake of her son.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was May, and Park Lane was in its zenith of metropolitan prettiness, newly-painted house-fronts flashing in the sun, flower-boxes streaming with pink geraniums or sulphur marguerites in every window, flower-beds that made one continuous splendour all along the drive, where the stream of moving colour, horses, carriages, fine liveries, beautiful faces, plumed hats and rainbow-hued parasols, vied with the stationary splendour of rhododendron, peony, and iris, and the sudden vivid blue of larkspur and lupin in patches of concentrated brightness.

Claudia had returned to the White House, and had been welcomed assiduously by some of her kindred; notably by Mrs. Harold Luscombe, who had "trotted" from Montagu Square after breakfast, immediately upon seeing Miss Rayner's arrival announced in a popular morning paper.

"Miss Rayner—whose father's eccentric will was a surprise to smart society—has re-established herself in the White House, and means to entertain on a splendid scale in the course of the season."

"You see I haven't waited to be asked," said Ruby. "We are all dying to see you, after such ages. I can't think how you could bear to be away from London, and this delightful house, so long—more than a year and a half."

"I was glad of a complete change."

"And you have been seeing things—and going to no end of parties. I suppose you were in the smart set in Rome."

"Is there a smart set?"

"Why, of course. I believe it is three-quarters

American and one-quarter British Embassy. But you must know all about it."

"Indeed I know nothing. I lived very quietly in Rome, and devoted myself to seeing things. I did not stay there long."

"I should have thought you would have stopped there all the winter. You know I never believe people when they tell me they don't care for society. It isn't human nature."

"You may believe in my particular case, even if you can't believe in a general way that people can have had enough of a thing."

"Ah, well, I may come to that stage myself before long; for, what with Harold's set and my set, I am dragged to death. We can't dine at home twice a week without running the risk of giving somebody the hump."

"I'm glad you have plenty of gaiety."

"People have been awfully hospitable and attentive; and Harold's friends move in a really superior class—artistic and literary. There's always at least one celebrity at their parties. And my own friends are oofy, and know how to give a dinner that a duke needn't be ashamed of; but they bring the smell of their chimneys to London with them. Frankly, Claudia, I want to get into a better set, the real good set; and I want you to help me."

A troubled look came into Claudia's face. Ruby seemed to her more terrible than ever. Her first cousin! So near in blood! And she foresaw that it must be a hard struggle not to hate her.

"I don't see how I can help you to make new friends. That ought to come gradually. You will meet more and more people until you meet the right people—the sort of people you want to know."

"Not a bit of it. I shall never meet them in Harold's set, still less in our manufacturing set. Their orbits never touch. But it will be no trouble for you to launch me, as you are going to give splendid entertainments—like Aunt Magdalen's."

And then, on Claudia looking surprised, Ruby recited the paragraph in the morning paper.

"Pure imagination! The man might just as well have said that I had bought the Albert Hall and was going to give a May-pole dance."

"Then you are not going to entertain—not going to make any use of these magnificent rooms?"

The day was warm, and all the doors were open between the picture-gallery and the three drawing-rooms, and all the colour and splendour of the rooms were intensified by the light of a May morning. Ruby looked along a dazzling perspective.

"No more use than to ask you and a few of my women friends to luncheon or to dinner now and then."

"You are going to give nothing but hen-parties?" cried Ruby, with frank disgust.

"Hardly parties. Just a friend or two now and then."

"But why? Your mourning is ancient history."

"My mourning will never be ancient history. It is in my heart—where Hamlet's was."

"Bother Hamlet! It is really too bad of you, Claudia; when I had so counted upon your launching me in Lady Magdalen's set. Why, I was even glad there was no prospect of a baby to interfere with my season, though the mother is always worrying about one. And now to hear that you are not going to give parties, or to go to parties, I suppose!"

"I have done with parties — giving or receiving."

Ruby brushed away some angry tears.

"You are indeed a strange girl, Claudia, and I don't wonder that people say things about you. The idea of any young woman with a colossal fortune doing nothing for society."

"I do not owe my fortune to society."

"But people are expected to do things. It is a duty! Think of your mother's splendid position—able to fill these rooms with great people!"

"It pleased her to do so. It wouldn't please me. I must live my own life, Ruby. But I will do what I can. I will look up some of the girls I used to know, girls who wanted to be my friends. I'll give a little

luncheon next week and introduce you to some of the girls who have married, and who give parties."

"Thank you. I absolutely detest hen-parties—but—well, I shall be glad to know some of your friends; for, as you say, it may lead to something."

Ruby had reflected that hens "with handles to their names" were worth knowing, however humdrum a party might be, to which her handsome young husband could not accompany her. Her ardent desire was to know people whose names were in Debrett, and Claudia's hen-party might be the thin end of the wedge.

"When shall it be? What days have you free?" Claudia asked.

Ruby assumed a considering expression, though for the luncheon hour her week was a blank, neither her set nor Harold's set being luncheon-givers. Their men were engaged in offices or chambers, and their women were too dull to entertain one another.

"I could manage Wednesday or Thursday," Ruby said.

"Let it be Wednesday—half-past one on Wednesday. I'll send you a note of reminder. And now tell me about your people. Theodore and Algernon have sent me splendid letters about Skepton; but they don't deal much in domestic news. How is Uncle Mathew?"

"First rate. I want him to come to stay with us, and do the theatres, in June, but I don't suppose we shall get him. He can hardly exist away from Skepton, and as for the mother she gets more and more hypochondriac every year."

"And tell me about Theodore's marriage. I hope he is very happy."

"He ought to be, for he has got a wife who worships him, and a lovely son and heir, just a month old."

"I saw the announcement in the *Times*."

"What a magnificent wedding present you sent him. He had heaps of handsome things, but yours took the shine out of everything. Such lovely Georgian plate."

"It was a copy of the old patterns."

"Yes, I know. The soup-tureen is a perfect gem. All I hope is they will never be burgled. And my diamond necklace, Claudia! I hope you know I am grateful. I was counting upon wearing it at your first big party. And now do let me have a real good look at these lovely rooms. It is centuries since I saw them."

Claudia tried to be cousinly, and walked through the gallery and the three drawing-rooms with Ruby, who scattered all the biggest adjectives she could command in praise of the pictures and tapestry. It was painful to hear her slavish praise of Park Lane, and her affected depreciation of Montagu Square.

"I want you to dine with us next Friday—when we are going to have some artistic people; Daisy Grant who plays the 'cello; and Latimer Robinson whose first novel will be published in June. Harold says it is going to be an eye-opener. He was at Rugby with the author. They call each other Harry and Lat. I do wish you would come, if you could support existence for an hour in our microscopic dining-room."

"I don't mind how small your dining-room is—indeed, I think small rooms are often prettier than big ones—if you will let me come when you and Mr. Luscombe are alone."

"That's hard lines, when I want to show you off, and to stop people talking about you," Ruby added with a touch of temper, and an after moment of apprehension.

There were things she wanted to say and was yet afraid of saying.

"If people talk about me neither you nor I can stop them, Ruby, and for my part they can talk to their hearts' content. Their talk can do me no harm."

"You are so proud and independent, such an unconquerable spirit."

"I mean to live my own life. So far I am unconquerable."

She thought of the man who had tried to conquer

her; so worthy, so fit to rule, and how her stubborn spirit had resisted him. And now she was walking about among her art-treasures with Ruby, feeling like a thief. They were Mathew Rayner's treasures by right; and Ruby could have walked about the rooms exultant, showing them to her friends of Skepton or Bayswater, talking of them as "ours" or "the pater's," instead of depreciating Montagu Square with mock humility and very real malice.

Surely it would have been better to give up everything, and to live in the pretty little house at Hampstead where she had established her son, with Nurse Wilson and old Mary, and a couple of maids and a gardener or man-of-all-work. Surely that would have been better. But would the miserable annuity Ralph Rayner had allotted to a disobedient daughter be provision enough for the pretty house and garden, and the five servants, the minimum establishment for her young prince? She thought not.

And if she were to die before her son attained manhood, there would be nothing for him.

Nothing of that vast fortune which the grandfather had created and which the grandson ought to inherit.

"Well, Claudia," said Ruby, when she had finished her leisurely survey of the rooms and the view from the loggia, "all I can say is if this house were mine I should know how to cut a dash with it. I don't envy you Daneborough. There's too much of the musty old Tudor kings about it for my taste; but I do envy you these fine entertaining rooms."

She was gone at last, and Claudia breathed more freely. It was not yet eleven o'clock, Ruby having appeared at half-past nine. There was time for her journey to Hampstead, though the freshness of the morning was gone.

She went to see her son every day, in fair or foul weather. She had been living in Park Lane for more than a fortnight, so the newspaper man was late with his unauthorised paragraph. It was only ten days ago that she had been able to establish the child and his attendants in the house at Hampstead, a furnished

house which she had taken in Mary's name. The ostensible hirer was Miss Mary Baker, but Claudia's cheque paid six months' rent in advance, the house being taken for a year certain, with the option of continuing. It was a small, old-fashioned house in a walled garden, situated in the prettiest and most retired part of the once rustic neighbourhood, a spot that had happily retained much of its old-time rusticity. It was a house that agents described as "unique," and it was prettily furnished and altogether satisfactory, the property of a young widow who was contemplating a second marriage with the owner of a much finer house, and who had no further use for Green Lane Lodge.

Here Claudia came every morning, sometimes setting out before eight o'clock and arriving at Green Lane Lodge for breakfast. Her rambles over the Derbyshire hills had made her a fine walker, and she wanted no carriage to convey her to Hampstead. Sometimes she took Rag, and sometimes Chieftain, with a lead in her pocket for the streets and perilous places in the journey. She made nothing of the walk from Park Lane to Hampstead; or if she were ever in a hurry she could take a hansom in the Edgware Road for a part of the way. No one need know where she went. The servants were accustomed to see her go for long walks with her dogs, and though of old the walks had been only to the western end of Kensington Gardens, there was nothing in her present habits to excite their wonder, or to make them talk.

She feared no spying, no treachery from her household. Daventry was an old servant who had admired and loved her father, and whom her father had treated as a lieutenant or coadjutor rather than as a common servant. Ralph Rayner had known only two phases in his treatment of subordinates, the slave-driver and the familiar friend; and the slave-driver had always been forgiven for the sake of the familiar friend. His indomitable energy, and a quickness of blood that must always be up and doing, had made him an exacting master; but his lavish generosity and his humane and sympathetic feeling for his servants

had made him beloved. With his house-servants as with his "hands" he had been a king of men.

"Mrs. Vickers" and "Mr. Daventry," so called by tradesmen and underlings, had been rulers of the household ever since Claudia had taken notice of anything outside her nurseries. Other servants might come and go. Footmen were exchangeable commodities provided by Daventry, and dismissed if they failed to please him. He had his master's exalted idea of perfection, and the footman who could keep his place at the White House was a creature of superior mould. Lady Magdalen's footmen had been admired almost grudgingly by dames of loftier rank.

"I can't imagine where you find the creatures," said a duchess whose poultry-yard was her particular vanity. "They must have been born to order for you. They are as fine as my buff Orpingtons."

Claudia was not afraid of her servants. The housekeeper, the older housemaids, also of long service, were to her as friends—friends at a distance, with whom she exchanged but few words, but of whose loyalty she was assured.

She led her own life, without having to consider what her household might think of her. She had a new French maid, Philomène, older and more serious than Félicité, and Mrs. Vickers had been told that old Mary had retired on a pension.

"I almost wonder you can do without her, ma'am," said the housekeeper. "She did so love to wait upon you."

"I miss her very much, but she is not far away. She is living in the north of London, and I can go and see her often."

"Well, ma'am, of course she is not so young as she once was—though never did I know anyone more active—or an earlier riser. I wish our under-housemaids would take a leaf out of Mary Baker's book."

* * * * * *

May brightened and warmed into June. Soft showers, glowing afternoons, mornings of divine beauty. Claudia could not sleep after six o'clock, and was dressed ready for her walk at seven when her maid

brought the morning tea. Everything was prepared overnight for her morning toilet. There was no knowing how soon she might rise when the summer dawns were so early and so fair.

She and her dog were on foot at seven o'clock, walking gaily towards the Marble Arch. She had found out the nearest way to Hampstead—direct almost as the flight of the crow, yet with many turns to right or left, zig-zagging across the wilderness of brick and stone. She loved the morning walk that took her to her boy. Sometimes she could see him at an open window in Nurse Wilson's arms, seeming to watch for her coming. He was a person now, and knew her and loved her; he could almost stand alone, and he would scramble on to her lap, and put chubby arms round her neck, and talk to her, in his inarticulate speech. He was nearly a year old, the most beautiful creature in the world, she thought, and in his eyes there was always the look of the father whom he might never know. He had to choose—or to be chosen for—between a father and a fortune, and it seemed to Claudia that he might do without one but could not do without the other.

She would dare anything, suffer anything, rather than make her son a pauper.

She spent a happy hour or two with him in the garden, if the day was fine; and it was a delight to see his notice of flowers and birds and butterflies and Claudia's dog, or his own particular kitten, a long-suffering ball of Persian fluff, that allowed the chubby little hands to do what they liked with it. She heard all that he had said or done since yesterday. This morning he had said his first word—an actual word, and it was disheartening to hear that his first word was "Da—da—da!"

Claudia thought there was something supernatural in it.

She was utterly happy with her boy, and forgot all that there was of troublesomeness or of wilful wrong in her position. Even the ever-present image of her honeymoon husband had taken a lesser part in her life, so centred were all her thoughts upon her son.

His gradual development was full of delicious surprises, which made him seem a new creature every day, or, at least, every day more beautiful.

The two women, Nurse Wilson and Mary, fooled her to the top of her bent. They both adored the child with the kind of love that good women can always find for an infant abandoned wholly to their care. They were never tired of talking of his intelligence, his sweetness, his quaint little actions and nonsense speeches, his notice of this or that. They knew that his mother could do nothing for him, nothing but love and admire him, hold him in her arms and cover his face with kisses, gaze into his eyes, looking for the light of other eyes. She could buy him lovely things—toys in advance of his understanding; and the loveliest baby-carriage, a white car like a nautilus shell, with a white silk canopy to screen him from the sun. All this she could do; but she did not know how to feed him, or how to clothe him, or how to nurse him if he were ill. All services that made for his comfort and well-being she had to buy with money; and she was thankful that in her old nurse Mary she had at least one who would have ministered to the child without a fee.

Had she been a more capable mother her love might have been unsatisfied by those morning visits, those happy hours in garden or nursery. She might have wanted her child with her always. But in his present infantine stage it sufficed for the incompetent mother to see him daily, to be assured of his perfect health, and the charm and fitness of his surroundings. For the rest of her day she could satisfy her love by thinking of him and of the time when he would be old enough for her to bring him into her house as her adopted son. It might be well to wait till he was four years old, by which time she would be past thirty, almost a middle-aged woman; and the rich Miss Rayner at thirty might naturally like to have some young thing to make a ray of sunshine in her barren life. It had never occurred to her that an adopted son would be no better than an open scandal in a censorious world.

Those morning hours at Hampstead were blissful hours, and made up for a good deal of boredom in the rest of her day.

Ruby was not the only relation whose visit she had to suffer. A whole flight of Saffords came down upon her as soon as they heard of her return.

First her Aunt Delabole, affecting kindly interest, but disposed to be inquisitorial; wanting to know all that her dear Claudia had been doing in her prolonged absence.

"You might have been all round the world in less time, if you had taken Delfino. It was a pity you threw him over. He is quite the blue diamond of couriers."

"I changed my mind about travelling. I had no heart for long journeys—or anything adventurous."

"But you seem to have done absolutely nothing. Were you at Bordighera all the winter? Mrs. Dumayne Tomlinson, who always winters there, had never heard of you; and she knows every soul in the place."

"I did not stay long at Bordighera. It was too English for my taste. There were too many Mrs. Dumayne Tomlinsons."

"Of course that kind of person is always boring. I could not conceive your reason for trying Bordighera—though without a chaperon a quiet place like that would be best."

"I went to still quieter places—where there were only Italians—people of no importance. I wanted to be quiet."

"Well, you are looking vastly improved. And now I hope you are going everywhere, and going to do a lot of entertaining."

Claudia told her aunt that she meant to live quietly. She was going to give herself up to reading, a serious kind of reading. She might work at her piano, taking lessons from a Russian pianist—quite a young woman—whose recitals had delighted the musical critics.

Her aunt lectured her severely. People had talked about her long absence. They had asked questions. For a woman of vast means to go creeping about

out-of-the-way Italian places with a maid and a footman was not what society expected. People had wondered, and had asked why.

"You may suppose I took a high tone in answering them, Claudia," concluded Lady Delabole, "but there are impertinent people in London—people on the fringe of society—the vulgar pushers who are just tolerated—and it is not very easy to put them down. I could see they wanted to make scandal about you."

"What scandal could they make out of my touring in Italy?"

"They wanted to know the reason. They looked unutterable things. They had not forgotten your father's will; and the idea was that you had something to hide—a secret marriage—or—something worse."

Claudia turned deadly pale; and her aunt was startled. Had she hit an open wound? Had this girl actually disgraced herself? Had the iron-founder's blood shown itself in that low form?

"I can only say that it is very unpleasant for your own people," she said.

"I wish my own people and other people would put me out of their thoughts. It is a hard thing if I can't choose my own manner of life, at seven-and-twenty; when all I want is to live quietly in my own house."

"None of us can live our own lives, Claudia. You least of all. You ought to know that. You are perched on a pinnacle. Everybody exaggerates the amount of your fortune. And if you do strange things——"

"What have I done that is strange?" Claudia asked angrily.

"You have hidden yourself from all your relations and friends. You have chosen to creep about Italy—Heaven knows where, since you could not be at Spezia all the time—for a year and a half without a chaperon. And people want to know why. If you won't give them your reason they will invent reasons, much to your discredit. You ought not to have wandered

about without a woman of unquestioned respectability."

"A Mrs. General—the spirit of prunes and prism."

"Mrs. Anybody—provided she was a witness for your conduct. Delabole was horrified when he heard you were going about alone."

"I was not alone. I had old Mary, who is as good a witness for conduct as any Mrs. General."

"Old Mary! One of our Altrincham nurse-maids. She used to feed my canaries. I should like to have a chat with old Mary. Does she brush your hair still? Freda told me that she was ever so much better than her French girl at hair-brushing. I should like to see Mary, for old sake's sake."

"She is not with me now. I have pensioned her."

"Oh, she has left you! Then the next time you travel you won't even have an old servant for your chaperon—unless you were to take Vickers, who would be rather ponderous."

Lady Delabole had risen, and was moving slowly towards the door.

"I am having a dance on the twenty-ninth, Claudia, my last big party. You had better come, and stop people's talk."

"I couldn't come on any account, aunt. I have made up my mind to go to no parties this year—or next year, perhaps. I daresay I shall become more frivolous as I get older. As for the people who talk about me, I shall do nothing to diminish their pleasure."

"You are the most pig-headed person I ever had to deal with," said Lady Delabole, "quite your father's daughter."

She departed in displeasure, upon those words; yet when seated in her carriage, gazing with unseeing eyes upon the too familiar trees and flower-beds, Lady Delabole began to think it well that the girl had defied her. Had Claudia cringed, and been keen on appearing at the Grosvenor Square parties, wanting to make an ægis of her aunt's breastplate of diamonds and emeralds, it would have looked like guilt. A niece who had really compromised herself would hang on to an aunt in Lady Delabole's position.

She discussed the situation in a ten minutes' *tête-à-tête* with Lady Sedgefield, whom she met at an evening party, and the aunts agreed that there was nothing worse than eccentricity.

"She has always been *toquée*," said Aunt Sedgefield, "and after Michael's tragedy one has to be prepared for trouble. The father's extraordinary will meant fear of lunacy, but I think he must have been mad when he made it—so cruel to a handsome girl of five-and-twenty. Is she as handsome as ever, by the way?"

"Handsomer! She has refined in feature and colouring, yet she looks stronger and more imposing. There are men who would go mad about her, and want her without a shilling."

"If she has kept her beauty I don't think we need be afraid. They always go off in looks when they go wrong."

"There was one thing that looked queer," said Lady Delabole. "She has pensioned old Mary, and when I said I would like to see her she flushed and looked scared. I'm afraid there is some kind of mystery—but I hope it isn't too shocking."

Each matron thought of her own girl, and that a tainted wether of the flock in the near relation of first cousinship would be disagreeable and even damaging.

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On the heels of the aunts came the cousins. Lady Delabole's girl called after her morning ride, while Claudia was out, and returned to the charge with Lady Sedgefield's girl at half-past one.

"We've come to take you by storm," said Freda. "I called before ten, and they told me you had been out ever so long; so here I am again. Dora and I are dying for a long *causerie*, and to hear all your adventures."

"What oceans you must have seen," exclaimed Dora, "and what a cosmopolitan herd you must have met in a year and a half of wandering."

Claudia saw that her cousins were frankly in-

quisitive, with a prurient eagerness to catch her tripping. No doubt *they* had heard people talk, and had even helped in the talking. What an odious world it was in which girls between nineteen and twenty could sparkle with delight at the idea of a family scandal. She thought Lady Delabole's girl much worse than her mother, who had looked distressed and a little angry. The girl saw only the humorous side of the situation. There was pure comedy in the idea of the rich Miss Rayner sneaking about the Continent hiding a contraband husband, or perhaps something that had still more need of concealment.

It was horrible to Claudia to find herself the centre of inquisitive cousins and inquisitorial aunts, whose manner indicated what was going on in the outside world, or that portion of the outside world in which she was known either personally, or as someone to be talked of and written about. She had supposed that it would be easy to take her own line in life, to shut her doors upon the frivolous herd, and hold herself apart from a world that was not worthy of William Murray's wife.

She never forgot that she was his wife. It was for his sake—as much as for her own pleasure—that she was cultivating her mind, feeding upon all that was highest and best in the literature of the world, to be a worthier companion for him when he should come back to her. For the thought was never absent from her mind that he would come back on her own terms, come back to her as Antony came to Cleopatra, and confess himself her slave. She told herself that he would find life impossible without her, remembering all they had been to each other between the new moon and the old. Could such lovers part, and be satisfied in severance ?

It was for his sake she refused any share in the season's gaiety. It was not for William Murray's wife to be spinning round a ballroom in the arms of some callow guardsman, or to open her house to the herd. She wanted to be able to say to him : "I have lived like a cloistered nun for your sake."

For this petty annoyance, this questioning of aunts and cousins, she had been unprepared, and she began to wish herself back in her orchard on the hill above the deep blue gulf, in the scent of orange and lemon blossom.

"You do seem to have had a dull time," Lady Sedgefield's girl told her, after much questioning, while they were at luncheon. "I never heard of anyone staying at Spezia—a ghastly dull hole, I should think."

"I went to Italy to be dull, or, at least, to be quiet."

"You are rather different from your sister-in-law. She has been going the pace since last winter. No, nothing wrong! Mrs. Michael Rayner is the quintessence of propriety. *Noli me tangere!* Keep your distance. But she is immensely admired; and people say she is going to make a big match—something extra. There are no more dukes, but it is to be the biggest thing in the market."

"Of course she is ridiculously pretty," said Dora, "and as artful as she can stick. She has the kind of complexion that makes a woman look as if you could see the light through her. She wore nothing but black before Easter—black and diamonds. I believe she is wearing Aunt Magdalen's tiara—that high one with the fleur-de-lys pattern."

"I lent her my mother's tiara for the drawing-room last year."

"She'll wear it out if you don't take care. People say she sleeps in it. You'd better get your diamonds back before she puts them into her marriage settlement as heir-looms."

Claudia had scarcely got rid of the two girls when there came a telegram from Daneborough—answer paid.

"Enchanted you are back. Rushing you tomorrow. Can you have me for week?—LOUISA."

The prepaid sixpence was swollen to two shillings in Claudia's cordial reply. She would be charmed to receive her aunt. Her old rooms should be ready,

and the brougham should meet her if she telegraphed hour of arrival.

Claudia was not afraid of her Aunt Louisa. Her presence in the White House might necessitate a curtailment of the mornings at Hampstead, but time could be economised by an occasional hansom, and Claudia might start even earlier—at six o'clock instead of at seven. All this fuss with her aunts had to be gone through. Solitude and peace might come afterwards.

Lady Sedgefield came on the following day, but asked no questions. She was only observant, and studied her niece's face and manner. She stopped to tea, and discussed her sister Louisa before that lady appeared on the scene.

"Of course I shall be glad to see her. We haven't met since her preposterous wedding. I hope she doesn't bring her horrid little husband with her."

"Poor man! He is really very kind, and I believe a good parish priest."

"I am glad he is something—for he is the most middle-class person I ever remember meeting. It is too dreadful to think of him as a connection. So long as he is buried alive at Daneborough it doesn't matter *much*—but if she wanted to bring him to London!"

Lady Sedgefield pursued the idea no farther, for want of adequate words.

"Aunt Louisa did not mention him in her telegram, nor did I in my answer."

"That was tactful of you."

"But he may be coming all the same. There is plenty of room for him."

"Room for an Exeter Hall meeting of such tom-tits. I wouldn't mind him so much if Louisa were not so absurd. Her Easter letter to me was absolutely sickening. Oh, here she is."

Lady Louisa entered, announced by Daventry, and heralded by a prodigious frou-frou and a panting breath.

"Louisa," said Lavinia severely, even before performing a blood-relation's kiss, "you are stouter."

"Only the wee-est bit, darling. How sweet of you to be here to meet me. Claudia, you are looking bonnie. And can you really forgive me for taking you by storm?"

"My dear aunt, I am delighted to have you. You—you have not brought Mr. Lauriston?" Claudia added nervously, thinking that the vicar might be on the stairs.

"I tried to bring him, knowing you would find him an acquisition. But he was adamant. He would not go where he was not specifically invited."

Claudia did not know what to answer, when her Aunt Sedgefield came to the rescue.

"Louisa, you will have to diet yourself. You ought to go to Marienbad before the end of July. You always had a tendency that way—but *now*——!"

"My dear Lavinia, I don't in the least mind spreading a little."

"Spreading!" cried Lavinia. "Where are you going to stop?"

"The Daneborough air agrees with me perfectly, and I am not going to worry about my figure."

"You were always fatally lymphatic," said Lady Sedgefield, who prided herself on a waist that measured only an inch more than her daughter's, and who had made sacrifices for her figure that, if they had been made for her religion, would have given her a place in the calendar of saints and martyrs.

"Did you ever know anybody as unsympathetic as Lavinia?" asked Lady Louisa, when her sister had gone. "Not a word about Wilfred! Not the faintest interest in my married life."

"Aunt Lavinia has a bad manner."

"I call it a bad heart. And now, my dearest Claudia, tell me about yourself, all you have been doing in this long, long time that you have been so far away from dear Daneborough. I can't think how you could bear to leave that delicious place, your gardens and hot-houses, and your horses. Are you never going to ride again?"

"I have told Rawson to send up two of my hacks. I may ride in the Row, now and then."

"And I hope you mean to hunt next winter?"

"I think not. I shall go back to Italy for the winter."

"Oh, my dear, that is sad! Daneborough deserted again!"

"Not deserted while you and the vicar are there to keep things going."

"We do our best," said Lady Louisa blandly. "I think everything you ordered was done just as you would wish. The children's teas and Christmas tree, the old people's dinners, the tenants' ball, and the servants' ball, everything went off with éclat. Wilfred was ubiquitous. He had an eye for everything, and a head for everything. He reminded me of your poor father, who was so magnificent in all his ideas."

Claudia allowed her aunt to expatiate to her heart's content, and although Lady Louisa asked a great many questions about her niece's Italian wanderings, they were not troublesome questions, since she appeared quite unconscious when they were not answered. She was thinking of Wilfred, and the wonderful things he had done, how, by her influence, he had been hoisted on to the upper ground of county society, a height that he could never have scaled by himself.

"I remember the cruel things they used to say of him before we were engaged—middle-class, and suburban. A man of exceptional refinement, whose early life was spent at Shooter's Hill, which never was and never will be a suburb; while for a sound classical education he assures me that Eton is not in it with Dulwich."

Lady Louisa's presence in the White House had no disturbing effect upon her niece's life. Claudia was far away upon the north road, walking merrily in her short tweed skirt, long before her aunt had become dimly aware of daylight and an exterior world mingling with her gentle dreams. She was with her boy in the morning sunshine, showing him the butterflies, and plucking the big red roses for him to tear to pieces with active little fingers, by the time Lady Louisa had been aroused by the appearance of Bennet and the

morning tea; for Bennet was very little more matutinal than her mistress, and her idea of eight o'clock was anything on the right side of half-past.

Those mornings in Park Lane were Elysian for Lady Louisa; for at the Vicarage there was always the painful knowledge of the eight o'clock service, accentuated by the splashing of the vicar's cold bath in his dressing-room, and the feeling that she ought to emulate his heroism and be up and dressed in time for matins.

Claudia made much of her aunt during a visit that must needs be brief, as it would have been impossible for so devoted a wife to desert her husband.

She engaged an opera box on the pit tier, and contrived a concert or a picture-gallery for every afternoon. She placed her carriage at Lady Louisa's disposal for shopping and visiting among the friends of her spinsterhood, the more intimate of whom were solitary women with an unbounded capacity for gossip.

They all had something to say about their dear Louisa's millionaire niece, chiefly expressive of wonder; indeed, Claudia could hardly have excited more of that particular state of mind had she been a newly discovered animal from Equatorial Africa. Everything she did was so strange, though on discussion the strangeness seemed to consist rather in her not doing things.

Lady Louisa was too placid or too lymphatic in temperament to trouble herself or her niece about what people said. She told her friends that Ralph Rayner's daughter was her favourite niece, nearer and dearer to her than the girls whose Safford blood had been mingled with streams no less cerulean.

"One cannot be surprised if the dear thing is more original than the average girl," she said, "for though her father was not a self-made man, as some people have been cruel enough to assert, the Rayners had not been gentlefolks for many generations."

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The luncheon Claudia gave for Ruby's intro-

duction to a more exalted "set" than her own, was almost a failure; indeed, had it not been for Blanche and Patricia Barham, the failure would have been described as ghastly; for it was only those good-natured damsels who would have any dealings with Mrs. Harold Luscombe. The other units in a party of fourteen were not to be beguiled into talking to a young woman who had "outsider" writ large upon her expensively dressed person. Introductions were of no avail. An exchange of two or three sentences for civility was followed by a quiet drifting away to look at a picture or to talk to somebody else; and at luncheon, when Ruby found herself seated next Lady Sedgefield's girl, and boldly challenged her to conversation about the Wagner nights, a subject with which she had always scored at Bayswater dinner-parties, Dora replied curtly that she hated Wagner, and would not shut herself up in a theatre at six o'clock in the afternoon for the music of the spheres.

It was then that Blanche Barham came to the rescue and made Ruby talk about Skepton and Claudia's wonderful ironworks that made nearly all the railways in the world; and although Skepton was the last thing Ruby wanted to remember in that milieu, it was delightful to find someone who seemed to like talking to her, and who, in her own words afterwards to Claudia, "evidently took to me."

"I know your friend Lady Blanche took to me, and I think we shall be pals for the rest of the season; but I don't suppose it will go any farther with the others. I never met less agreeable girls. Say what you will, Claudia, I believe women show the worst side of their nature at hen parties."

If this was the launching of Ruby, it might be said that there was something wrong with the hull, and that the ship turned turtle.

Blanche and Patricia stayed out all the other visitors, even Ruby, declaring that they wanted endless talk with their dearest Claudia, a hint which Ruby took somewhat reluctantly, being loath to part company with the Barham girls until invitations had been exchanged and friendship established.

"And now tell me about your poor dears," said Claudia, when she was seated in the loggia with her two friends. "I hope they are all flourishing."

"We've had to replace poor Miss Claverhouse. You may not remember her by name. She was the born lady—the one who ran away from a very superior home to go upon the stage, and who had been in travelling companies all over the world, in queer shabby theatres in mining cities most of her time, I believe. Claverhouse was her stage name, but she told us her real one was even more splendid."

"I remember her perfectly. She talked about her grandmother's peaches and grapes. And is she no more?"

"Went off suddenly after acute bronchitis. Never would have her bedroom window open, winter or summer. We have replaced her with a poor thing who worked her fingers to the bone when she was young, and bent herself nearly double over her sewing machine when she was old, stitch, stitch, stitch, making muslin blouses for three-halfpence a piece. Such a cheery old thing, and so happy with us. You must come to our next party."

Claudia was doubtful.

"You must miss Mr. Murray," she said.

"Oh, at first we missed him most awfully. And we were haunted by the idea of his sufferings in Africa—for they always do suffer, though they make light of it."

"Have you heard from him since he went away?"

"One little letter. Very sweet and kind—two or three months ago. He was going to explore the Pigmy Forest; and we tortured ourselves by wondering how many pigmies it would take to kill a fine strong man like him. But I hope he would go armed to the teeth."

Claudia was silent, frozen with a sudden fear that came over her when she thought of her husband. For a moment she was in the cottage parlour at Grasmere, the room where they had been so happy and so safe, and from which she had sent him back to the land of untimely death.

"Life seemed hardly worth living without his awakening sermons," said Patricia; "and as for spiritual food, our poor dears were practically starved, with only a vague young parish curate to talk to them occasionally, and never touching the right chords. It was quite pitiful, remembering all Mr. Murray had been to us and to them."

"I don't know what we should have done if he hadn't come to the rescue," said Blanche.

This was enigmatic. "He" had always stood for William Murray.

Patricia answered Claudia's questioning look.

"She means Mr. FitzPatrick, who is holding an East-end mission this summer. Someone told him of our poor dears, and he came to see them in the sweetest way, and made them roar with laughing at his funny Irish stories, and then frightened them into fits by his serious talk about their souls."

"That is just where he is so wonderful," said Blanche. "His power of contrast. From grave to gay! He comes to our weekly teas, and he keeps us all amused. His sketches of the Irish peasant and the Irish priest are inimitable. He could make a fortune on the stage. But he is a perfect saint, a man who makes one think of the early Christian martyrs, coming into the arena with a proud step and smiling at the wild beasts."

"Do you like him better than you liked William Murray?" asked Claudia.

She spoke the name very slowly. It was long since her lips had shaped it in actual speech, though in her thoughts and in her prayers the name repeated itself continually. "William, my William."

She listened with ironical wonder while these feather-heads talked of their new light.

"Oh, it was not a question of liking. We positively worshipped Murray," protested Blanche. "It isn't possible for us to prefer anyone to him. But you know he is very serious—just a wee bit Scotch—and though the poor dears worshipped him in their way just as we did in our way——"

"I have not forgotten the little brown teapot."

"Wasn't that pathetic? They have bought a fire proof muffin-dish for Mr. FitzPatrick, finding that h revels in muffins. It's extraordinary the way the get on with him—in spite of the dreadful things h says to them. All tea-time they are dying witl laughter at his anecdotes; and then when the tea things are cleared away they sit staring at him witl eyes of horror while he tells them they are going alon the broad road to burning hell."

"Do you think that's quite a sympathetic way o talking to feeble old women?"

"They love it," said Patricia. "The fact is dea Murray was too gentle and namby-pamby for them He never forgot that they were poor old things wh had had very few chances in life. He was always making excuses for them, and telling them they had only to be contented and happy and kind tc each other and they were sure to go to heaven. That rather hurt their feelings. Mr. FitzPatrick makes them tremble when he thumps the table and talks about everlasting fire."

"He's more like Savonarola than dear Murray. We had ospreys in our hats the other day—they were old ospreys, relics of the days when we got our hats in Bond Street, before people began to make a fuss about the birds—and they had figured in dozens of hats. We explained that, when he talked to us about our cruelty, and assured him that our murdered birds were ancient history, so our wearing the poor little feathers couldn't matter.

"'It couldn't matter! And what about the example?' he roared, thumping the table, so we just ran into the kitchen and cut out the poor little aigrettes with a table-knife, and threw them into the fire."

"I don't think I should like your Mr. FitzPatrick," said Claudia.

"You will rave about him after you have heard him preach, and still more after you have seen him with the poor dears. He is coming to our tea next Tuesday —so you must be sure to come. You will be charmed by his power of contrast; and then his voice is un-

paralleled in grandeur, and he has bright blue eyes with a laugh in them—Irish eyes—and eyebrows like Dean Swift's that meet suddenly in an awful frown and change the whole aspect of the man."

Claudia remembered an engagement for the following Tuesday. Not for worlds would she sit in that quaint old parlour where her magical hours had been spent. She could always recall William Murray's face that first time, when her presence took him by surprise ; the faint glow on haggard cheeks, the sudden light in tired eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Lady Louisa had gone back to Daneborough after a "too delightful" visit of nearly three weeks, and Claudia was alone in the White House, and the London season was beginning to languish ever so little, Parliament still going strong, but the early people scattering to Continental watering-places, or the now fashionable Harrogate, to get themselves into condition for a strenuous August at St. Andrews, North Berwick, or on a grouse moor.

She was alone again in the waning season as she had been two years ago, before she had seen William Murray's face. But how stupendous the change in the life that was then so empty, so barren of love and hope—and that was now so full of love and anxious thought.

She had her son. While he was well and happy, growing day by day in beauty and intelligence, it seemed to her as if nothing could touch her; nothing but some terrible news from Africa, and she tried to brace herself with the belief that the man who had worked safely and even happily among the dark-skins for nearly ten years must needs be safe among them now; while it could hardly be imagined that God would abandon the faithful servant labouring for Him in the wilderness. She had become more religious since her marriage—and among her philosophers she had found room for the great theologians. Newman, Pusey, Church, Liddon, had been her companions since Murray left her. She wanted to bring her mind nearer his; and it was because he had praised them that she had read Robert Hall and William Law.

Sometimes while her thoughts soared heavenward she was brought to a sudden check by the consciousness of her own wrong-doing.

"Am I a cheat and a hypocrite because I am fighting against injustice?" she asked herself, and, alas, she knew that not one of those saintly men whose words moved her would have held by the good things of this world against abstract truth.

"Am I Mrs. Facing-both-ways?" she wondered, and then an hour later, in the rose garden at Hampstead, she was thinking of her son's future and the splendid career that her gold was to buy for him.

As yet illness had not touched him. He had been the healthiest as he was the loveliest of infants. But she thought how if he were ill the chief of London doctors must be summoned; and how could a guinea a mile be paid twice a day, perhaps for weeks, out of seven hundred a year?

She kept his first birthday as a festival, spending the whole day at Green Lane Lodge, and overpowering Nurse Wilson and old Mary by the splendour of her presents, a diamond ring to Wilson, a gold watch to Mary. She chose all the toys that she could think of within the range of her darling's year-old intellect. Great soft balls of many coloured fluffiness, barking dogs and miauling cats, mechanical monkeys and dancing bears. Nurse Wilson would not allow more than two of them to be exhibited on the birthday, lest it should throw the child into a fever; and her utter incompetence was brought home to Claudia, who had contemplated a great array of toys spread out in the sunshine, and the boy moving dazzled and babbling among them. He was to have only one monkey and one ball, and he liked a sixpenny drum that old Mary had given him better than the realistic monkey or the rainbow ball.

On this first birthday Claudia allowed herself an indulgence that she had not ventured upon before. She hired a landau from a livery stable in Hampstead and took Willie and his two nurses for a long drive. July was at its loveliest, and the country northward of Green Lane Lodge was arcadian. The child was

delighted with this moving world, a world of motion and change that was new; green fields, flowering hedges, that ran away while he looked at them. He stretched out his arms to snatch a late blooming dog-rose, and it was gone as he gazed. He crowed and danced with wonder and delight; and while Claudia was holding him in an ecstasy of motherhood, there sounded the hoot of a motor car behind her, and as the huge scarlet and brass machine slowed a little to pass her carriage she saw Sylvester Treswick standing up to look back at her and waving a motor cap.

Sylvester Treswick—just the one man in all the world she most hated to meet. The incident spoilt her day. She could not get the man's image out of her mind. He was haunting her still when she drove back to Park Lane in a hansom, in time for a nine o'clock dinner. The thought of him mixed with every morsel of that neglected meal.

She had always hated this man, with a repulsion that was almost physical, an aversion she had struggled against but could not conquer. Her mother had liked him, and had been kind to him, lavishing gifts upon him in acknowledgment of his fussy little services. She had let him advise her about her clothes—had let him fetch and carry for her. She had treated him as a French marquise in the days of great ladies would have treated her high-born page.

But Lady Magdalen had never been a student of character. She had liked people not for what they were *au fond*, but for what they were to her—serviceable, amusing, pleasant to look at or to listen to.

A week passed, and Treswick had made no sign. He was going all over London perhaps, talking of Miss Rayner, and the child in her arms, giving form and substance to that vague scandal which had not gone beyond the expression of wonder.

It was nearly a fortnight after Willie's birthday when Daventry came to the loggia half an hour before luncheon, with a card on a salver and a troubled expression of countenance.

"You told me I was never to admit this gentleman, ma'am; but he insisted on my bringing you his card."

The face of the card was pencilled all over with microscopic scribbling.

"Pray give me a quiet half hour. I have something of importance to tell you—something vital. Half an hour will be enough, but I must see you. Your slave, S. T."

It was like a pistol held at her head.

"You can bring Mr. Treswick here," she said wearily.

Daventry wondered at this capriciousness.

She would have to see him, to submit to insidious hintings and questionings. He would have an axe to grind, no doubt; and this time she would have to be interested in his grinding—unless she chose to defy him, and let him hunt out her secret, and make his fortune out of it. He could go to her uncle and tell him what he had seen that summer afternoon, between the blossoming hedgerows.

She had questioned old Mary closely about anybody who might have been noticed by the servants hanging about the house, observant and watchful, or who might even have gone so far as to question a servant going in or out. But Mary had heard of no such person, and she had great confidence in the two young women, who were the essence of respectability at high wages.

She was sitting in the loggia, with her book-table drawn close to her low arm-chair. The atmosphere was sultry, and her morning walk had tired her. She had changed her dusty tweed skirt and jacket for a muslin and lace *négligé*, quite the most exquisite example of careless elegance, and her hair had been dressed by Philomène's expert fingers, the heavy plaits coiled in an ebon crown upon the perfect head. She was wearing a rope of pearls, and in her languid beauty she looked like an Italian princess, a poet's protecting goddess.

Mr. Treswick, being ushered into the loggia, recoiled as if dazzled by too much light.

"How utterly beautiful!" he exclaimed in an awe-struck whisper, as he slid with serpentine movements towards Claudia's chair.

"The daturas are very fine, if you don't mind the strong scent," said Claudia.

The loggia was brilliant with white bells, and gaudy spikes of orange and scarlet, daturas and cannas, from the prolific greenhouses at Daneborough.

"It was not those stupid white flowers that took my breath away," murmured Treswick.

Claudia waited in freezing silence, with her book open on the table and the ribbon mark across the page.

"I did not know you were in London, or I should have called ages ago. Why, oh why have you exiled yourself? It is two years since I came to you with my tremendous scheme."

"I fear your scheme stopped short of realisation, since I never heard of the ideal paper."

"When you would not help us the thing was hopeless. I tried other millionaires, but the average millionaire is a Shylock; he won't hazard a pound without the hope of seventy shillings interest. That is how he has become a millionaire. He has no ideals."

There was a pause. Claudia waited for the insidious questioning that she had reckoned upon as inevitable.

"What a delicious surprise to see you that lovely afternoon in that dear rural road. My favourite duchess was taking me to Hatfield—a place I adore, history in stone. She has a passion for babies—as she has for art and science and private theatricals and philanthropy and everything divine. 'A baby,' she screamed, and ordered the chauffeur to slow down as he passed your carriage; and while she drank the beauty of the child I had time to admire the *tout-ensemble*, a living picture that echoed the famous Murillo—divine mother and divine infant."

"When you luxuriate in rodomontade you might at least avoid profanity," said Claudia, looking at him steadily, with a face of marble.

"Of course in this case the mother was out of the picture—for I conclude that the lovely boy belongs to the rather plain and very commonplace person on

your left hand. So odd that homely mothers often have exquisite children. It is one of their compensations."

There was a silence, a silence that was more oppressive than the sultry air. Claudia took up the open book, and turned a leaf or two, glancing dreamily at the headlines. Then feeling the absurdity as well as the painfulness of the situation, she turned suddenly and faced her enemy. She found his eyes fixed upon her, eyes calculating and anxious.

"From the words on your card I concluded you had something very important to say to me—or I should not have consented to see you in an hour I always give to my books."

"People have told me what a student you are."

"Something vital! I think that was your word."

"Something vital—to me. To you no more than a speck of thistledown—an aerial atom that floats across the sunshine and vanishes."

"In plainer words you have another axe to grind."

"Call it so if you like. I have another literary scheme to recommend to you—an infinitesimal venture as compared with a daily paper. I want to do something—some small thing to raise the tone of current literature—journalistic literature—the literature of a day, which fades as the roses fade, but which influences and colours the world that fosters it—born only to die, yet leaving its mark upon the minds of men—an indelible mark—vulgarity or refinement—the false or the true in art, in literature, in morals. Oh, think what a power it is, the power of the printed word."

"I believe you said all this two years ago, Mr. Treswick."

"A great abiding truth does not change in two years."

"Please come to the vital point."

"You are all a woman in impatience. Pray, pray, don't look at that clock. I have worlds to say."

And then Mr. Treswick expounded his plan. A magazine, a monthly magazine unlike any other magazine in the history of periodical literature, a very

expensive magazine, paper that would be a joy to touch, print that it would be rapture to read, one illustration only in a number, but that a pearl, an etching worthy of Whistler at his best.

"But if there are no more Whistlers?" questioned Claudia.

"Dear lady, I will find one. I shall call my magazine 'Quintessence': just that and nothing more, the quintessence of all that is exquisite in criticism, brief, grave, gay, sparkling, not more than twenty pages, and those not crowded with matter. A review of all that the world has been doing in the brief span of a month, exposure of pretenders, denunciation of the false and the trivial, the philosophy of beauty, the beautiful in life, a magazine for the cultured and the rich, and so costly that a very limited circulation would pay."

"The idea sounds attractive for the people who care about such things. But what do you want from me?"

"I want you to be interested in my scheme, to realise the beauty of the idea and to be impatient to see it materialised."

"I am a lover of books, and take very little interest in periodical literature, beyond a morning paper that tells me all the dreadful things that happened yesterday, and all the dangers that menace my country to-morrow. I think if people cannot be refined and improved, and made better in mind and morals, by the great books of the past and the present, they won't be mended by a magazine."

"Then you won't help me? You absolutely refuse to sympathise with a man of ideas crippled and nullified by want of capital."

"I begin to understand. That is the kind of help you want—money. How much?"

"A thousand pounds would enable me to produce my first number. The money would be only a loan, and would be a first charge on the magazine."

"When the magazine materialises? But there are some that die unborn, are there not?"

"Oh well, they may not all be such bantlings as

your dowdy friend's superb baby; but with even that modest capital my magazine should make a splash. And then I will tell you a trade secret. First numbers always sell. Your thousand pounds will be safe."

Claudia rose from her low chair, slowly, as if her limbs had been made of lead. She held her head at its haughtiest angle, she looked at Treswick with eyes of scorn; but as she walked to her writing-table in the smaller drawing-room she felt as if she had been walking to the stake.

She seated herself at the table, opened a drawer and took out her cheque-book, Treswick watching her with sparkling looks, triumphant and elate.

She filled in the cheque quickly, hardly looking at it, and signed her name with an angry force, and then controlling herself, filled in the counterfoil, tore off the cheque and handed it across the table to her visitor—who took it with a faint flutter of the slim, white hand, looking at her with a kind of awe. He was afraid of her even in his success, as some treacherous Nubian slave might have been afraid of Cleopatra in her imperial anger.

"I hate business transactions with social acquaintance, Mr. Treswick," she said slowly, "so you may consider this money a free gift—as it would have been from my mother."

This let him know that she was aware of various benefactions that he had received from Lady Magdalen in his financial difficulties. She had grumbled a little to her daughter at having to come so often to the rescue of her tame cat, when his tailor or his landlord threatened him. She was a woman who kept no account of the money she spent or gave, but her husband had remarked upon the recurrence of Treswick's name in her pass-book.

"You are like your mother in generosity as you are in beauty," he said, slipping the cheque into his waistcoat pocket.

She pressed an ivory egg on her table, and the message of dismissal ran along a silken cord to a bell that rang clear and long. Treswick did not offer her his hand. He was afraid to give her the chance of

refusing to shake hands with him. He murmured his acknowledgment of her bounty, as of one overpowered by his emotions, and followed Daventry downstairs.

The door was scarcely shut when Claudia sprang up and began to pace the room like an imprisoned tiger.

"Blackmail!"

Yes, this was blackmail! Money extorted from her apprehension of the harm this man could do her. What unspeakable degradation. To be afraid of this worm—and to buy his silence.

"My son! My dearest and best! I have made you the child of shame."

She flung herself into a chair in front of a Florentine table, and struck her forehead upon the marble again and again, in a passion of self-contempt, of fury and despair. She had no relief from tears. Her eyes were dry and hot, and ached as if there had been thunder in the air. She ranged from drawing-room to picture gallery, and then fled upstairs to her bedroom before Daventry appeared to announce luncheon.

She sent Philomène to tell the servants that she was not going to take any luncheon, and to order her brougham in half an hour.

"I have a bad headache, and I am going to lie down," she said, holding her handkerchief to her forehead. "Put out the gown I wore yesterday, and a shady hat, and don't come till I ring for you."

She looked in the glass when Philomène had gone. Her forehead was red and swollen. To-morrow it might be black, and she would have to invent some story about a fall upon the staircase, and a blow against an angle of the wall. She dressed herself without any help from her maid, and the shady hat answered its purpose. No one would see the mischief she had done to herself in that hysterical outburst. She was waiting in the library when the carriage came to the door, so intent upon the errand on which she was going that every minute seemed important.

"The General Post Office, Charing Cross."

Daventry wondered at the order. It was not often that she went so far east.

She wrote her message and handed it to the proper official.

"To William Murray, care of the Mission House, Uganda. I am in great anxiety—pray come to me. Claudia. Park Lane." Nothing more. It was a message that would make no revelation to his friends at the Mission House, should it arrive in his absence. It would tell them nothing. It would tell her husband very little. Indeed, it was only a cry of despair, inarticulate, undecided. It was no full and complete surrender—no promise of yielding to his will. She had not made up her mind about the future. She had not nerved herself to the sacrifice of all that could secure her son's well-being in this world, the wealth that makes a race apart, a race who live in a golden age, a paradise of satisfied desires, in the midst of the howling wilderness where poverty fights and falls in the life that is one long battle.

The clerk took her message as indifferently as if it had been a merchant's order for goods. No cry of despair could startle his custom-hardened soul. She paid for a reply, and was assured that her message should be cabled without delay.

It was done. She went home a little more at ease, a little less crushed by the humiliation of her encounter with Sylvester Treswick.

Then came the weary time of waiting, every hour counted till the earliest minute at which the post-office clerk had told her she could receive a reply; and then the long, agonising hours after, until it was made evident to her that Murray was not at the Mission House when her message arrived.

She went back to the Post Office twice, saw different clerks each time, penetrating to inner offices and men of more importance, wanting to be assured that her message had gone, that the cable was working, and that telegraphic communication between Mombasa and Uganda was not interrupted. She was assured that there had been nothing to hinder the delivery of her message—no cause for delay.

He was ill, perhaps, stricken with fever, delirious, dreaming strange dreams among dark, forbidding

faces. She had waited too long before appealing to him, and her cry of despair had come too late, had come to ears that were deaf, to lips that were silent. She sent a second and a third cablegram to the same effect, always the same cry, "I am in distress. Pray come to me."

It was while she was enduring the slow tortures of suspense in the days that followed the despatch of her third message, that she was surprised by a visit from Lord Frankland, whom she had not seen since her father's death.

He was still unmarried, and his ambition had been achieved without the help of a rich wife. Lord Frankland had become a personage. He was in the Cabinet, and a leading spirit in the party of progress, the ardent advocate of all measures that made for bringing light into dark places, but not a truckler to democracy. To be Lady Frankland would be distinction for any woman.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, and he found Claudia walking up and down the gallery, just as he had found her on a July afternoon three years ago, when the sky was grey and the summer rain was beating against the windows.

She was surprised at his visit, all her thoughts being worlds away, in an African wilderness; and she gave him her hand absently, looking at him with a face of vague distress, as if even he might be the bearer of evil tidings from that far-off world.

"I heard you were in London some time ago, and I have been wanting to see you, but you have made yourself such a recluse that I hardly dared to call," he said, and then, as she seated herself, he chose a chair near hers, looking at her searchingly, reading all the signs of distress in a countenance he knew by heart.

She spoke of his public career.

"You ought to be happy," she said, "for I think you have realised your dream of life."

"Not quite. The dearest part of my dream is unfulfilled."

"I am speaking of your career. You could hardly have hoped for more."

"Fortune has been kind so far. The cards have fallen luckily; but there are more precious things than a seat in the Cabinet, and I am still a dreamer of dreams that are unrealised. Claudia, we have known each other a long time. Will you forgive me if I say things that only a friend can venture to say? And will you promise not to be angry?"

"That is difficult if you are going to say offensive things. But I don't think you will do that."

"Not willingly; but I have to tell you something that it may hurt you to hear. People have been talking about what they are pleased to call your strange life. People who are malicious from mere vacuity of mind, wanting something to talk about."

"I have been told as much by my cousins, who perhaps have done their share of the talking."

"One's relations seldom let one off cheap. But, Claudia, knowing, as you must know, what our world is made of, would it not be well to make some concession to conventionality? It is not easy for a woman in your position to hold society at arm's length, to live alone in one of the finest houses in London, to refuse all counsel and help from women of importance, like Lady Delabole and Lady Sedgefield."

"You mean that I ought to lead an utterly conventional life—I, with my own idea of what makes life worth living. That I ought to go about the world under the protecting wing of an aunt."

"It would be better than to spend a year and a half in obscure places in Italy, where you had no English friends, where nobody in England ever heard of you."

"Oh," said Claudia, while a sudden spot of crimson flushed the pallor of her cheeks, and slowly faded. "Have they made a scandal of my Italian holiday? I was unhappy, and I wanted to be quite alone, away from people I knew; so I went to the Genoese Riviera and stayed there, with only an old servant to take care of me. Have they made that a scandal?"

"Unhappily, yes. People have talked of your disappearance, have shrugged shoulders, and lifted

eyebrows, and smiled and insinuated. Oh, you must know the malice, the unprovoked malignity of that sort of people—the people to whom the depreciation of their betters is meat and drink. People have said the very worst that could be said about your long absence ; and since your return scandal has taken a new development, a scandal set on foot, perhaps quite innocently, by the Duchess of Hilderness, who talked of passing you in her motor, seeing you with a child in your arms—a child of a year or a year and a half old."

"Is that such a tremendous thing, to be seen taking a friend and her baby for a country drive ?"

Lord Frankland looked at her earnestly for a few moments, before he answered.

"It would hardly seem so. But you have to reckon with your exceptional position. All the world has heard of your father's eccentric will. Everybody knows that you are to forfeit your fortune if you marry."

"And they think I am hiding a marriage—or an intrigue. They think that child is mine—perhaps the child of shame. Is that what they think ?"

The crimson had come back to her cheeks, the deep blush of indignation, as Frankland thought.

"Give the world the lie, Claudia. I know how baseless these rumours are, how easily you could explain all that there is of strangeness in your conduct. And there is one way by which you can make your traducers ashamed of themselves. Be my wife. We are strong enough to set our foot upon the snake—together."

"You—you care for me as much as that ?" she said.

"I have never ceased to think of you as the one woman who could make my life perfect. I am no longer dependent on a wife's money to patch up a ruined property ; and if you were to forfeit every scrap of your fortune, which I do not believe you would, I should still hold you the highest prize Fate could give me."

Claudia looked at him with frank wonder.

"You would not be afraid to marry me—in spite of the things you have heard ?"

"I have perfect trust in you. Years ago, when we were close friends, I learnt to understand you before I began to love you."

"You don't even ask me to justify myself?"

"I would not insult you by a doubt."

"You are a good man. You are a good man," she repeated, pacing the room in uncontrollable emotion. "You deserve to know the truth, the whole truth; though you will think badly of me when you know all. You will despise me as my husband did."

"Your husband!"

The word was a death-blow to the man who had loved her, persistent in the face of refusal, holding doggedly to the belief that the woman he loved was to be his at the end of the day, his reward for constancy to one idea.

"Your husband," he repeated, with bloodless lips.

And then she told him the story of her marriage, defending herself, and asserting her right of judgment, just as she had done to William Murray, but with something less of courage and self-confidence. She told him how for her son's sake she had been more than ever determined to keep her fortune, at any cost of holding herself aloof from a world she had never valued.

"I wanted nothing from society. People might have let me go my own way without slandering me."

"That is just what people won't do."

"You are very much shocked—and disgusted?" she said, after a silence, in which he had stood before her with his eyes on the ground, one hand grasping the upper rail of a light chair, like a man who has received a crushing blow and wants time for recovery.

"No, no, not disgusted, only grieved—grieved that my ideal woman should have made so pitiful a mistake. To retain a fortune that you have forfeited, to hide your marriage—and let your child grow up without a name! To leave your husband in ignorance of his son's birth! If another woman had done this——"

"You would have found no word shameful enough."

"No, no, I am not going to use shameful words. But to me your secrecy has been very cruel. I have gone on hoping. With every scrap of success, every word of praise in a newspaper, every trumpery platform triumph, the enthusiasm of an evening, I have said to myself, this brings me a step nearer her; for I thought you liked me well enough for liking to ripen into love in the sunshine of a successful career. I counted on what I had seen of women's devotion to men who have made place and name in the world; and it was for your sake that I wanted to raise myself above the ruck. Well, that dream is over; but it would have been kind if you had trusted me with the secret of your marriage, even while you were hiding it from other people."

"I could not believe that you had gone on caring for me."

"I told you that I should go on caring, and that I should go on hoping."

"It was a mistake. You were the only man I ever liked and respected among my mother's friends; but I never knew what love meant until I met William Murray."

"William Murray." He repeated the unknown name to himself in a whisper, before he answered her.

"And yet you parted from him?"

"Wasn't it horrible? I let him go back to the land of danger. He had worked there for seven years, had been at the point of death with the horrible African fever, had been wrecked on Lake Nyassa and had had to swim five miles in the teeth of a tropical storm. I made him tell me of all the perils and escapes of those seven years. I liked to hear of all he had done and suffered for his fellow-men; and I told him that he was never to go back, never to risk the life that was so precious to me; and after that I let him go. And now I am waiting to know if he is alive."

She told him of her message, twice repeated.

"You asked him to return? Then you have come to his way of thinking, and you mean to take the straight course and declare your marriage?"

"I don't know. I only told him to come to me.

The position had suddenly become intolerable. I wanted to mend it somehow."

She told him of Treswick's visit, and her cheque.

"That made life unbearable," she said.

"That skunk! Yes, I should think so. You might submit to a false position, hardly realising what it meant; but not to that—not to be blackmailed by Treswick."

"Blackmail! Yes, that was the word I thought of."

"And you called to your husband across half the world to come and stand by you? That was your only course."

"I called, but he has not answered. Do you think he is dead? If I believed that, I should go mad. Yes, I should realise my father's fear—I should justify his outrageous will."

Frankland was kind, and spoke words of comfort, suggesting the possibilities of change of place, the many chances of delay in the transmission of her message. He was very kind. By giving him her confidence she had made an irresistible appeal to his chivalry. He was strong enough to put his own feelings aside, as if it were another man who had just received the death-blow to a long cherished hope. He was able to think only of her honour and her happiness.

What a wreck she had made of her life—she, the woman whose self-esteem he had admired as a virtue, the only woman he had ever thought of as strong enough to stand alone.

She was soothed by his suggestion of various reasons for a delay that had frightened her.

"You were always kind," she said, "always wise. Yes, I shall hear from him perhaps in a few days. I may have been too ready to fear. He said that he would come back to me, if I asked him; but I knew that he put a price upon his return. I was to give up everything; to make myself a pauper; to submit to see my rightful inheritance swept away by my uncle and his provincial brood."

"Is your uncle keen about money?"

"I don't know. He has always had all he wanted. I suppose he would be called liberal and open-handed."

"But you think he would claim his pound of flesh, that he would take all that your father's will entitles him to take?"

"Yes, I suppose he would take everything, to the last farthing. He is a manufacturer, a tradesman. How do you suppose such a man would act in such a case?"

"Perhaps generously. At the worst I think such a man would try to act with some show of fair dealing."

"You do not think he would take all that the law would give him?"

"Not unless he were a north-country Harpagon. I have heard a very good character of your uncle. I think you might trust him."

"Appeal to him *in formâ pauperis;* beg him to leave me a few pitiful scraps out of my father's fortune—the crumbs from the rich man's table—the crumbs that the dogs eat?"

"I would make no appeal. It is not in your nature to stoop knowingly; but in this case you have stooped very low without knowing. You have been wilfully blind, I think. You would not look your fate in the face. You would not open your eyes, and see what a discreditable position you have made for yourself."

"My soul revolted against injustice. You are like my husband. You will not understand how cruelly I have been treated."

"Perhaps I am a better man of business than your husband. He seems to have seen the case only from a moral standpoint. He urged you to give up all, believing that Mr. Rayner would take all. I have seen something of such conflicting interests between near relations, and have seen them settled, not ungenerously. You refused to take your husband's advice?"

"I let him leave me—rather than give way to his idea of right. We parted at the end of our honeymoon. Was there ever a sweeter honeymoon, or man and wife nearer akin?"

Her tears came unawares, for the first time in all

their talk, and she turned from Lord Frankland and walked to the other end of the room. He waited patiently, while she battled with herself, moving about the room restlessly, like a spirit in pain.

"Claudia, you know that I am a man of the world, and that I am your friend. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know you are my friend."

"Well, it is because I am your friend that I urge you not to delay an hour in making the crooked path straight. Write to your uncle by the first post, tell him of your marriage, and leave the upshot in his hands. Every day of persistence in the wrong course will make the right course harder, harder with your uncle, more difficult with the world. Don't wait for your husband to come back from Africa. Don't wait even for a reply to your cable. Write to your uncle within this hour. Believe me, whatever the issue, it is the thing that must be done."

"No, I won't write. I couldn't write in cold blood. I will go to Skepton and tell him my story. Oh, what a chorus of wonder and exultation there will be! How my cousins will triumph! I have kept them at a distance; I have never felt that they and I were quite of the same clay; and now I shall be lying in the dust at their feet. My uncle will ask me for an account of my income since my marriage. He will want to know what I have done with his money—and I must tell him that I have given it away, spent it, wasted it. But I have saved nothing for myself; I have no private hoard, no scrapings in a teapot."

"I don't think he will be hard with you."

"Ah, you don't know how men whose lives are spent in commerce value money. My father was on a different plane. He was an inventor, a man who loved progress. He spent his money as princes spend, without reckoning; but he did not value it for its own sake."

"It may be painful to you to make your confession to Mr. Rayner. Will you let a friend undertake the task—a friend who would carry the business

through in a plain, common-sense way? Will you let me do this thing for you?"

"You! No, no! You are very kind. But I must drink the cup of humiliation to the dregs. I never meant to give way. I thought I was as fixed as a rock. But this silence in Africa, the misery of not knowing whether my husband is alive or dead—all the horrible dreams and imaginings that have tortured me for the last three days and nights—have made me as weak as water. I am too miserable to go on fighting, too miserable to care if I had to go straight from this room to the workhouse; and if my Uncle Mathew will promise to provide properly for my boy——"

"You are to have seven hundred a year."

"Seven hundred! An annuity! What is the use of that? If William Murray is dead I am not likely to live to the end of the year. I shall have his fate on my soul, weighing me down to the dust. I sent him back to Africa, because I would not do what he thought just and right; and now, because you, a man of the world, not a saint like him, because you tell me to do this thing, I am going to do it."

"I do not think you will be inclined to upbraid me when it is done. I do not think you can have been happy in a false position."

"Happiness was out of the question from the hour he left me."

CHAPTER XXV.

SKEPTON was being baked in the July sunshine, and had a grim and dusty aspect to eyes that had been accustomed to the olive woods and cypresses and sapphire sea of the Genoese Riviera. Claudia wondered if the place had grown uglier since she had last looked at it; her kingdom, of which she had once been so proud, and which she had come here to surrender, with all the shame of a tardy surrender, reluctant and apologetic at the same time.

She had telegraphed to her uncle, asking him to be at his office at five o'clock that afternoon, when she was coming to see him on important business. She wanted to be alone with him, within the four walls of his office. She did not want to make her confession at Vale Hall, where Pearl or Veronica might bounce into the room and interrupt her. She remembered the fuss they had made about her, their slavish adulation, with a little point of envy sharpening a phrase now and then. And now she was to come down from her pinnacle; and no doubt in any future dealings with them they would make her understand what it was to be a common mortal, and to wear a cheap hat instead of a golden halo.

Skepton looked uglier than ever; but there were the people, and it was the people she had cared for, the people whose strong vitality and keen intelligence had been a revelation of elementary things, of life without complications, life in which neither the rest-cure nor the morphia needle had any part; the straight and sturdy pilgrimage along a rugged road, through fair and foul weather, the life of daily toil

under conditions that made labour just tolerable. It was the people she had cared for; and they were to be her people no longer. That thought stung her. She remembered her pride in them, her delight in all the good that her father had done for them; and she remembered how those new interests, the masses of men and women and children all so intensely alive, had lifted her soul out of stagnation and gloom, and had widened her ideas of human life and filled her mind with thoughts of a new world, the world of strenuous work and stern reality, a world in which there were no social shibboleths, no "quite quite" and "not quite"; a world in which nobody pretended to be smarter, or richer, or cleverer than he was, the world of elementary feelings and hard facts, where an affront was settled by immediate head-punching, and not garnered in the memory for years and expatiated upon at one's club, with the inevitable conclusion that the offender was "*not* a gentleman."

All Claudia's thoughts of Skepton had been good thoughts, all her dreams and imaginings about her people had been touched with a lovely light, an earnest desire for the widening out of all that was narrow in the life of toil, for progress in education, progress in happiness, holidays that should be something more than respite from labour, children's treats that should be something more ennobling than the rapture of a steam merry-go-round or the blare of a brass band. She had been full of schemes that might have been Utopian, but which were at least generous and disinterested. She had never thought of Skepton as a machine for producing millions, though she had heard of it all her life as the source of her father's wealth. She had only thought of so many thousands of human beings working for her and being cared for by her, and of her responsibility for their welfare.

And then had come the passion of love, and the late awakening of a strong, impetuous soul. The world had dwindled to the spot of earth that held William Murray; and every dream and every desire had centred in the man she loved. Skepton had been

almost forgotten. The busy lives, the masses of men, women and children, had become vague as figures in a half-forgotten dream. She had hardly read the letters in which her junior partners had described this or that development in the business, this or that improvement in the machinery. It was only now, on the threshold of her renunciation, that she remembered how much this kingdom of iron, this place of chimneys and monster engines and ever-burning furnaces had once meant for her.

She had forgotten the face of the porter who had assisted in waiting upon her when she occupied her father's rooms in the works. The man came from his tea in a little den near the door, to welcome her, as she alighted from the station cab.

"Glad to see you looking well, Miss. Mr. Rayner's upstairs expecting you, and I've taken up tea-things, but my wife wouldn't make tea till you came."

The omission of the definite article made her smile, even in a crisis. It was one of the peculiarities that had first struck her in the speech of her people. After all, why that everlasting definite article, when the substantive conveys the fact?

The man preceded her up the bare stone stairs to her uncle's office. It was in the wing of the chief and largest of the Rayner ironworks, a vast stone quadrangle, where in lofty halls leviathan engines throbbed all through the summer day, and in the glare of winter gas, the first or parent works created by Ralph Rayner's grandfather, the foundation of Skepton as a place of iron and steam, where the rails that made the new iron roads between North and South had been fabricated. And it was in the wing that had been built for offices and a manager's dwelling-house that the principals had their private rooms. Mathew met his niece with an outstretched hand and a kind face.

"I am very glad to see you, Claudia. You have been away from us too long. Sit down, my dear. Here's my one armchair, not much to look at, but comfortable. Sit down, and let me give you a cup

of tea. You are looking very tired—tired and pale. I hope you are not ill."

"No, I am not ill, Uncle Mathew. I am only unhappy. I have come to you with my burden of trouble, come to throw it down at your feet. I don't know what is to happen to me afterwards, something worse perhaps; but I know that I can't go on living the life I am living, though it seemed easy enough only a month ago."

"What is amiss with your life, Claudia? Ruby tells me you have made yourself a kind of recluse, and that you have puzzled people and set the London gossips talking about you. Is that what is amiss?"

"That is a very small part of my trouble."

"I know very little about what people call 'society.' I have never cared to find out the ways and ideas of idle people in London. I am not ashamed of being provincial, as my daughters are. And I don't see why a young woman who likes to live a retired life in her own house should have ill-natured things said about her. I was glad when you came back to your London home, for I thought you had stayed away too long. *That* seemed mysterious, and I hate mystery."

"You did not give yourself any trouble to find out what I was doing in Italy?"

"Why should I do that, Claudia? I believe you are a good woman, and incapable of any act that could make me unhappy about you."

"You are a good man, Uncle Mathew; and I am not a good woman. No good woman would have acted as I have done in the last two years. No good woman could have justified her own conduct, silenced her conscience, as I have done. I thought that I had a right to defend myself from the injustice of my father's will. I was married nearly two years ago, Uncle Mathew; and I have kept the secret of my marriage. I have a son a year old; and I have kept the secret of his birth, even from his father."

And then she told him, in broken sentences, agitated, tearful, eloquent in her impassioned feeling,

of her love for William Murray, of his noble life, the life that was one long sacrifice for his fellow-men; how she had loved him and let him leave her, and how at this hour she was agonised by the fear that he had perished in the fatal country to which her folly had sent him.

Mathew Rayner was kind and sympathetic. He seated himself by her side, and took her hand.

"Wait and hope, my dear," he said. "Your husband may be a wanderer in uncivilised places, where neither post nor telegraph can reach him. You must go on hoping. And now let us talk seriously. You have shown very little wisdom in your management of your life, Claudia. You have not acted by any means with the common sense or the—the fair dealing—I should have expected from my brother's daughter."

"I have been a cheat. Why don't you give me my right name?"

"I am not going to use hard words. But you have not treated me quite fairly. Do you remember what I said in the library at Daneborough after I heard your father's will?"

"You said it was an unjust will, and that you were sorry."

"And after I had said that did you believe that I would take the uttermost advantage of my position, in the event of your marriage?"

"I believed that you would take what the law gave you. Why should you not?".

"Only because I am an honest man, and when I protested against the injustice of your father's will I meant what I said."

"I thought that any man in your position—a man of business—would take what his brother meant him to have—would even think it disloyal to take less than his brother's will gave him."

"A man of business! You thought that a man of business would have no compunction, would take the utmost advantage of a will that he himself had pronounced unjust. I am sorry you had such a poor opinion of me, Claudia."

"I thought you would stand by the letter of the law, that any man of business would do so."

"Never say that again, Claudia. Your country is ruled by men of business, who would never have won the place they hold if they had not been honest men. It is not fair to suppose that such men are incapable of broad and liberal views. You have been very foolish, my dear, unjust and ungenerous to me, and cruel to yourself and your husband. You should have come straight to me when you made up your mind to marry. You would not have found me difficult to deal with."

Claudia was silent, sitting with bowed head, crushed and humiliated.

"You have spoken of the injustice of your father's will, and that he was hardly in his right mind when he made it. Well, I am inclined to think, as you do, that his mind was unhinged by the shock of your brother's melancholy end, and that all his ideas were coloured by the fear of hereditary madness, he being unable to see that Michael's state of mind was the natural result of a religious enthusiast's sense of failure, and of a most unfortunate marriage. I believe, as you do, that if your father had been spared a few years, and had learnt to know you better, he would have cancelled that will. His sudden death was a calamity, and it would be far from me to let you suffer too severely for that stroke of fate. We won't talk of money to-night, Claudia; but you may make your mind easy about your future—and your son's future. Whatever advantage I may take, for those who come after me, from your father's will, you will remain a rich woman, with a bigger income than you are likely to spend, except upon works of charity."

"The will gives you everything—Daneborough—the White House."

"I don't think we shall turn you out of either of your houses."

It flashed through Claudia's mind even in the midst of her agitation, that if "we" included Ruby there might be some danger of confiscation, re-

membering the hungry eyes that had devoured the splendour of the gallery and the three drawing-rooms, eyes that were obviously measuring the distance, in social advantage, between Park Lane and Montagu Square.

Claudia had told herself that she was to lie in the dust when she made her surrender; and now she was lying in the dust, but in a spirit she had never dreamed of, humbled by her kinsman's generosity. This was the man from whom she had kept the secret of her marriage, to defend herself from whose avarice she had stooped to a life of falsehood. Could she ever forget the shame of these moments, while she sat by her uncle's side, and he kept her hand in his, pressing it gently, with assurance of affection?

"Come, my dear, try to take a cheerful view of your position, and look forward to your husband's return. You can send him another cable telling him that you have given me your confidence, and that all is amicably settled between us. He will understand."

"Yes, he will understand—if my message reaches him. But, oh, that horrible country!"

She clasped her hands over her eyes, and Mathew saw tears streaming down her pallid cheeks, and then she turned from him, sobbing passionately.

He urged her to go to Vale Hall with him, promising that she should have perfect quiet and seclusion there. Pearl and Veronica were at Scarborough. There was only her aunt at home.

"No, no—you are all goodness, Uncle Mathew—all goodness to a wretch who does not deserve one kind word from you. But I must go back to London to-night. There is a train at half-past six."

Mathew pleaded against the tiring journey, the arrival in London late at night; but Claudia was resolute.

"I go to see my son every morning," she said. "He has been all the happiness of my life. I may have nothing left but him."

Her uncle went to the station with her, and saw her comfortably established in a reserved compart-

ment. She would be able to dine in the train. Her dinner would be brought to her. She smiled at his assurance that she was not to be dinnerless. Did he think that food could be anything but dust and ashes to her dry lips? It was like a man to think of such details.

"Keep up your courage, Claudia, and hope for the best. I will run up to London on Friday, after I have talked over our business relations with my sons. You see I am bound to consider their views as well as my own. But you need not be afraid. Your partners are just men."

"And your daughters? They may have other views."

"They must accept their brothers' view—and mine."

He spoke with the authority of a man who had always ruled his household, and with whom the opinions and views of daughters counted for very little.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Claudia was too agitated for anything but snatches of sleep on the night after her journey, and she was with her son earlier than usual on the following morning. Her heart beat furiously as she clasped the boy in her arms. He was not to be a pauper; he was no longer to be nameless; he had a kind friend in the man she had thought of as his worst enemy, that good man whose character she had so misunderstood. She told Mary of her interview with her uncle, and her old servant sobbed aloud for joy.

"Oh, Miss Claudia, Miss Claudia, what a weight you have taken off my heart! If you could know how I have suffered—to see my dear young lady taking the wrong road—the way of falsehood and deceit. To see my noble-spirited young lady stooping to a lie! Oh, Miss Claudia!"

After this torrent of words Mary became speechless, and almost hysterical. She had suffered grief and shame for Claudia's wrong-doing. It would have been no hard thing for her to have shared poor days with her mistress, to have drudged for her, a maid-of-all-work in some fifth-floor flat, in rooms like pigeon-holes, to have managed and contrived and lived on short rations; but her sense of right and wrong had been outraged by Claudia's concealment of a marriage that she ought, in Mary's opinion, to have been proud of, since to be William Murray's wife was distinction enough for any woman.

"And now Mr. Murray will come back to us," Mary said, when she had dried her tears, and could talk calmly.

"He will come back to us, if he is still upon earth," Claudia answered; "but I am full of fear."

She told Mary of the cabled message—twice repeated, still unanswered; but Mary took a hopeful view.

"It must be a difficult country for getting about, and the wires may be out of order, or there may be no telegraph office where Mr. Murray is residing," she argued soothingly.

Claudia went to the post-office after leaving her boy, and sent her fourth message, a long message, telling her husband that she had confided in Mathew Rayner, "in obedience to you," and that all was to be settled amicably and advantageously, and entreating him to come home without delay.

"I have something to tell you, something that I think you will be glad to hear."

That was the concluding sentence.

Her uncle was with her on the following afternoon. He had lunched with his daughter in Montagu Square.

"Did you tell Ruby about my marriage?" Claudia asked, with a shiver at the idea of Ruby's exultation.

"Yes. I thought it would save you trouble."

"She must think very meanly of me."

"No, no. I told her you had made a romantic marriage, and were a little ashamed of having been carried away by your enthusiasm, a little afraid of what worldly people might say of your choice."

"And she believed that? She did not think as badly of me as I deserve? She does not know my sordid motive for secrecy?"

"She knows nothing. She began to talk about your father's will; but I barred any discussion of that kind. I have always been an indulgent father, but I have always been obeyed."

He did not tell Claudia that Ruby had urged her father to take immediate possession of the White House. If he wanted to be absolutely quixotic he might allow his niece to occupy Daneborough for her life, but he ought at least to exercise his right over the London house.

"It is your money that she has been squandering for the last two years," said Ruby. "Everybody knew that there was something underhand going on, and most people suspected a secret marriage. You will be a fool if you don't exercise your legal rights."

Mathew Rayner was not the kind of man to allow one of his children to call him a fool—even in a future or conditional tense. His reply and the look that accompanied it made Ruby's blood run cold, but did not deprive her of speech.

"I believe you are fonder of Claudia than you are of any of us," she whimpered.

"I am very fond of Claudia; but you have no right to make such a comparison," he said, and then after he had gone to the door he came back and said quietly, "You have only to use your common sense, Ruby, and to consider whether your mother would be either in her element or happy in the White House; even if I were willing to rob Claudia."

"Rob Claudia, indeed! Claudia has been robbing you rather coolly. I don't see why the mater shouldn't hold her own in Park Lane. She was always a splendid manager, and in the matter of entertaining I could give her all the help she would want. In society it is the house that counts, and the way things are done."

"I should be sorry to exchange Vale Hall for Park Lane, and your mother would like the change even less."

"You might think a little of the younger generation. The White House would make all the difference to my sisters and me, and would help Harold in his career. But I suppose Harold and I are to profit nothing by Uncle Ralph's will."

"You and your sisters have profited handsomely already; but perhaps a few crumbs may fall your way."

Crumbs! Ruby was left to meditate upon the word after her father left her. She was furious at his refusal to appropriate the White House. She walked about her drawing-rooms, in their utmost spaciousness of open archway instead of folding doors—and she

looked contemptuously at the imitation Chippendale and Sheraton, the spindle-legged tables and wheat-ear chairs that had seemed the perfection of taste when she and Harold chose them at the ultra-modern upholsterers. It was maddening to think of her father refusing the White House, where she might have helped her mother by being mistress of the situation, planning entertainments and making up the visiting list. Social success would have been assured with such a platform, sustained by her own savoir faire, which would make up for the maternal shortcomings.

* * * * * *

Mathew Rayner found his niece calm and self-possessed, and it seemed to him as he quietly unfolded his views, that the woman who had been guilty of such dishonouring reticence showed very little anxiety as to how much or how little of her fortune was to be taken from her.

"Your father's intention was plainly expressed," Mathew told her, "and though everybody must have thought as I did, that the will was an unjust will, I do not believe for a moment that you would have succeeded in any attempt to upset it. But if you had trusted me, I would have told you that in such cases between kinsfolk, there are often compromises which leave both parties satisfied and maintain family feeling. It is seldom that a man's conscience will allow him to profit to the extreme extent by a will which he can but consider cruel and unjust."

"I never thought of such a compromise, Uncle Mathew; I thought you, or any man in your position, would take what the law gave you."

"Perhaps it was my own fault for not being explicit. I ought to have told you my views before any complication could arise. But I never doubted that you would confide in me, if your ideas upon the marriage question changed, and that I should be one of the first to hear of any engagement of that kind. It seemed so natural for you to come to me and say, 'Uncle Mathew, I have found someone whose affection is worth more than worldly wealth, and I want to

know how much or how little I am to take to the man I marry.' "

"That would have been coming to you like a beggar."

"No, it would have been coming to me like a niece assured of her uncle's love. Well, we were both too reticent. If I had opened my mind to you before you left England, much trouble might have been saved. You remember that last visit to Skepton, late in the year. Was that after your marriage?"

"Yes. I had been married two months, and I had parted with my husband——"

"Yes, yes, you told me the reason of your parting—because he was an honest man and would not suffer underhand dealing. Oh, I don't want to be unkind, Claudia; but it isn't easy for me to forgive you for your want of faith!"

"I shall never forgive myself," Claudia said, in a low voice.

"Never is a long day. We have to forget mistakes in the past, and steer a safe course for the future. Now to business. My sons and I have threshed out this question of your father's will in all its bearings. For my own part, and if my interests only were at stake, I should act as if the clause that forbade your marriage never existed; but I have to think of my sons and those who are to come after them, and I don't want to be generous at their expense. They have both given the best of their lives and minds to the development of the works, and the carrying out of your father's ideas. They looked up to him, admired him, moulded their characters upon his; and it would hardly have been strange if, in his disposal of his estate, after your brother's death, he had given them the place of sons."

"It would have seemed natural for him to do so. I know that he thought highly of them."

"Well, what I propose, having a regard for my sons' interests, is that the Skepton estate—ironworks, houses, land—should be divided between you and your two cousins, that you should be partners in the business, as you are now, but partners upon

equal terms, each owning a third share in the entire property. This house and your estate in Derbyshire will remain yours, and your children's after you. Will this arrangement satisfy you, Claudia?"

"Satisfy me? You crush me by your liberality—you make me hate myself for believing that you would take everything, and leave me nothing but that pitiful annuity."

"You thought very badly of me, Claudia."

"No, no, not of you, but of the world we live in. People are such slaves of Mammon. I thought that in such a case, any man would think he did well if he acted according to the letter of the law."

"Then you gave no man credit for honour and honesty?"

"I could not think that any man would forego a great gain when the law gave it to him."

"Well, you see, I am not foregoing my sons' aggrandisement."

"But you are taking nothing for your daughters."

"My daughters will be considerable gainers, since I can leave them property that would have gone to their brothers."

Claudia's expressions of gratitude were broken by her tears; but her uncle would not hear of gratitude; he would not allow himself to be called magnanimous.

"The magnanimous course would have been to take nothing, but where there was so much to deal with, I thought my sons might fairly profit. I like to think of the name of Rayner holding its own for centuries to come, among the great names in commerce. A hundred years ago when the Skepton iron was being carried in wagon-loads to Hull to be shipped for London and the Continent, our forefathers were working men. They forced their way to the front by their industry and good conduct, and I am proud to think of my descendants holding their own in our little bit of industrial England."

Mathew Rayner rose, drew a long breath, and stretched his powerful frame to its full height, with the air of a man who throws off a burden.

"Now, Claudia, when am I to see this son of yours?"

"This afternoon if you like. There would be time for us to drive to Hampstead after tea."

"Oh, he is at Hampstead?"

"Yes, hidden from prying eyes. My secret paradise is at Hampstead."

"Well, there need be no more secrecy. There may be some awkwardness in the announcement of your marriage. Any formal notice at this distance of time would be strange; but you must let the world know when and where you were married. I think a paragraph in one of our local papers would be best, giving the particulars briefly, and adding that for family reasons—a phrase which may mean anything or nothing—the marriage has been kept a secret, except from intimate friends, until now. Such a paragraph will, of course, be copied in other papers, in London and elsewhere, copied and expatiated upon in the modern way. But I don't think you need fear that anything offensive will be said."

"I fear nothing now, Uncle Mathew, except evil to my husband."

* * * * * *

It was a happy moment for Claudia when she put her boy in her uncle's arms, and saw Mathew's tender smile as he looked at the child. He was one of those men who love children, and who know how to handle them. The boy crowed, and cried "Dada," which at this stage of tooth-cutting was his favourite verbal utterance; but the crowing and da-da-ing were expressions of regard that pleased Mathew Rayner.

"See how my darling takes to you. Will you take care of him if I should be obliged to leave him, Uncle Mathew?"

"Leave him! Why should you leave him?"

"If I can get no news of my husband I shall go to Uganda."

"My poor child, what could you do in Uganda, you who know nothing of the country or the people?"

"There are Englishmen there who would help me to find my husband."

"My dear, it would be madness for you to go. I hope you will have news of your husband before long, satisfactory news."

"I try to hope that; but I am full of fear."

There was a pause, while Mathew improved his acquaintance with the child by the unfailing resource of opening and shutting a large gold watch, a glittering disc that puzzled and amused, the clear blue eyes opening wider as they looked at the mysterious object, the rosy lips pursed up in profound thought.

"My mind will be at peace about my son, come what may," Claudia said, after she had watched the two faces in silence, the man's grave smile, the child's placid countenance, at his ease in the stranger's arms, nestling against the ample waistcoat, held so deftly and firmly by the broad muscular hand. "I know you will be his guardian and friend, and that life will be smooth and happy for him; but if William Murray has met an evil fate in Africa—if I am never to see him again, I pray God that my time on earth may be short. I sent him to that fatal land, Uncle Mathew; it was my own act, my wicked obstinacy in taking my own way. I was so proud of his love, and I thought his love must bend to my will, and I was angry with him because he would not see things as I saw them, because he was an honourable man, while I was a cheat."

"He would have done better to take the law into his own hands, and come straight to me."

"He told me that he would have done so if he had not thought that I should come to his way of thinking. He is a good man, Uncle Mathew, an apostle, a man who holds his own life as nothing, in the service of God and man. If he is given back to me you will find that I made no unworthy choice."

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The answer to Claudia's messages came that evening, an answer that brought despair.

"Murray left Uganda on a mission journey northward in April. No news from him since May 4. Gravest fears entertained.

"Burford. Mission House."

It was too late for the cable that night; but Claudia was at Charing Cross before nine o'clock next morning. Her message was brief:

"I shall start for Mombasa by the quickest route. Am telegraphing funds. Use all possible means in searching for Murray."

She drove from the post office to Cook's, as the only place she knew of where she was likely to get the information she wanted.

Could they tell her the most expeditious way of getting to Uganda, by what line of steamers, and the earliest departure?

There was a German Line from Dover to Mombasa and other East African ports, by intermediate steamers, at monthly intervals. She would have to wait three weeks for the next steamer. The Maritime Messageries steamer for East Africa would leave Marseilles in less than a fortnight. Claudia decided on this line, and told the clerk to engage cabins for herself and a maid. Having settled this question she went back to the post office and cabled again to the Mission House, asking that news might be cabled to her at Daneborough Park, Derbyshire, during the next ten days, and afterwards to Poste Restante, Marseilles. She wanted to have the last news before setting foot on the ship that was to take her to Mombasa. From the post office she drove to a foreign agency, where the manager promised to find her a courier-maid, experienced in sea voyages and difficult travelling, who was to be ready to leave London with her in ten days.

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Mathew Rayner had promised to dine at the White House that evening, when Claudia's idea of going to Uganda was to be considered seriously. He would know nothing about the alarming message from the Mission House till they met, and Claudia employed her afternoon in a visit to Green Lane Lodge, where she arranged with Nurse Wilson and Mary for their journey to Derbyshire on the following day. Her

plan was to establish her son at Daneborough before she left England. He would be well cared for by his two nurses, and he would have Lady Louisa close by, who, no doubt, would be eager to cherish him. In her present state of mind, agonisingly apprehensive of the worst that could happen to the man she loved, Claudia would make short work of her aunt's astonishment, and would assume her new position as William Murray's wife with supreme indifference to opinion. Her uncle's generosity had moved her deeply, and the relief of mind that had followed her confession had shown her how weary a burden of deceit she had been suffering in her struggle against fate.

Her uncle appeared at half-past eight, with business-like punctuality. She was calm and self-possessed, but it was the calmness of despair. She showed him the message from the Mission House, and though he tried to take a hopeful view of the situation, he had to admit that the news was alarming. He no longer opposed her journey to Uganda; and he praised her for her prompt preparatory arrangements. The journey was adventurous, perhaps even hazardous; but he knew that anything would be better for her than to wear out her heart in England with the slow torture of apprehension and suspense, the horrible imaginings of what might have happened.

He had heard something of the Uganda Mission House—he knew that on arriving there his niece would be cared for and protected. He and other leading men in Skepton had been interested in Central African mission work. Even the name of William Murray was not unknown to him. He remembered reading, in a missionary magazine ten years ago, of the young man's strenuous labour and perilous adventures. He felt assured that Murray's wife would command helpful kindness from members of the Church Missionary Society, or, indeed, from any rival sect, for though Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Presbyterians, might sometimes do battle for a proselyte, they were always ready to help each other in difficulties.

Claudia and her son had two or three quiet days

at Daneborough before Lady Louisa was aware of their arrival. The servants had no doubt talked among their immediate friends of the wonderful thing that had happened, but their talk had not reached the Vicarage before Saturday morning, when a paragraph in the local paper made Lady Louisa stare aghast at her husband as she pushed the paper across the table, with her finger on the startling headline:

"ROMANTIC MARRIAGE OF MISS RAYNER."

The paragraph was an elaborated version of the notice that Mathew Rayner had sent to the Skepton press, the elaboration being matter of a purely speculative character, the descriptive reporter's facile eloquence.

"Married two years ago, and to a missionary," said Lady Louisa in an awful voice, staring at her husband with widely opened eyes. "I could have forgiven her—I should have admired her—for marrying a member of the Anglican priesthood, but there is something inferior about a missionary, a Presbyterian perhaps, or even a Dissenter."

"My dear Louie, how can you say such things. There is no more exalted office than to risk health and life in the propagation of Gospel truth. I had thoughts of missionary work myself. Indeed, my soul hungered for such a career; but my poor mother's precarious health forbade my leaving her."

"Wilfred!" exclaimed Lady Louisa, who had not been listening to a speaker upon whose words she generally hung with as profound attention as the sorrowing companions of his last hours must have given to Socrates. "Wilfred! This marriage makes my niece a pauper."

Mr. Lauriston's comment was a prolonged and melancholy whistle.

"You have not forgotten her father's horrid will?"

"Not much," said Wilfred, who affected certain flippant turns of speech, as a relief to the clerical seriousness that was the staple of his conversation.

"And my thousand a year?"

"Gone! Rather a blue look-out for us, Louie."

"I shall have to put down my victoria."

"No, no, my love. We must reduce our expenses in some less obvious direction. I don't want to see my wife belittled. After all, with your own income and my living, we need not starve."

"A thousand a year! We have been able to do things really well. We shall have to part with Tomlinson, and do without a man-servant."

"And I must sack the under-gardener, just when I was thinking of building a hot-house, so that we might not be entirely dependent on other people for our Easter decorations."

"And there will be no more grapes and peaches from Daneborough when Mathew Rayner is master there."

"Do you suppose he'll take possession of Daneborough?"

"Of course he will," Lady Louisa answered, almost in a shriek. "The man will grasp what the will gives him, and the will gives him everything."

"He might take a generous view of the position."

"Generous! A man whose only education has been pounds, shillings and pence. An iron-master! Did you ever know a generous iron-master?"

"They sometimes subscribe handsomely."

"They like to see their names in a subscription list. Every guinea feeds their pomposity. But do you suppose he'll leave that wretched girl a penny beyond her miserable annuity? How could she be so insane as to marry, with such a fortune as hers in the scale?"

"But, my dear Louie, you did not think of ways and means when you made me happy by saying yes. And Miss Rayner may have been over head and ears in love, as I venture to think you were."

"With a missionary? They are generally plain."

"Queer that she should have concealed her marriage for two years and blurted it out at last."

"Family reasons!" repeated Lady Louisa, snatching the newspaper from her husband, as if she doubted

his capacity for understanding what he read there. And then she read aloud in a hollow voice—beginning with those mysterious words, "Family reasons":

"Family reasons have prevented the announcement of the marriage until a few days ago; and the nature of those family reasons is not far to seek. May it not be that the bridegroom was of somewhat lower social status than the bride—perhaps a man of the people, famous for deeds of derring do in his missionary work on the Dark Continent, and for his pulpit oratory—a self-educated, self-made man, between whom and the Earl of Altrincham's granddaughter there might seem an immeasurable gulf—a gulf only to be bridged by an over-mastering love? This we take to be the romance hidden under those two commonplace words 'family reasons.' In any case we congratulate the Reverend William Murray on an attachment before which the barriers of caste have fallen as Jericho's walls fell at the trumpet call of Israel, and we offer our respectful felicitations to the lovely young mistress of Daneborough Park on a marriage that throws the golden light of poetry over the prose of high birth and wealth beyond the dreams of avarice."

Thus had written the most picturesque pen at the service of the *Daneborough Chronicle and Weekly Advertiser*, expanding and embellishing Mathew Rayner's sober statement of his niece's marriage.

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Lady Louisa snatched up her garden hat and sunshade and almost ran across the park to Daneborough House, where she found her niece at breakfast with her son, and old Mary in attendance upon him. Old Mary, before whom there was no more need of reserve than before Rag and Chieftain, both present, and very glad to return to a place where there was always the chance of a rabbit hunt.

"Oh, my dearest Claudia, my poor, poor child," cried Lady Louisa, falling upon her niece's neck like a relation in the patriarchal age.

"My dear aunt, pray don't be too unhappy about

me. Let me bear my own burden," Claudia said gravely.

"Oh, my poor love, how could you make such a sacrifice? Everything! This too lovely house, where I suppose you are only staying on sufferance—just while you get your personal belongings together. Luckily he can't touch those—not even poor Magda's diamonds. Those ought to give you some addition to your income, if you sell them advantageously."

"I am not going to sell my diamonds, aunt; and I am not going to lose Daneborough. My uncle is a generous man, and has treated me with splendid liberality. I shall be rich enough to have no need to think of money."

"I am overcome with delight. You have taken an intolerable weight off my mind," said Lady Louisa, pleased at her niece's good fortune and glad to know that her thousand a year was safe. "Mr. Rayner must be indeed a generous man—one of nature's noblemen. And I suppose *he* knew of your marriage from the beginning, though your mother's family were kept in the dark."

Claudia allowed herself to be distracted by her son's attempt at speech, a rather lengthy remark in an unknown tongue that, together with the expression of his infantine countenance, indicated a humorous appreciation of Lady Louisa's garden-hat.

"Don't point, darling. Go and give your great aunt a pretty kiss."

Lady Louisa gave a horrified little squeak.

"Great aunt! How awfully old that sounds. Come to his great aunty-paunty. He is a charming child, Claudia, quite the most beautiful infant I ever remember; but then he has the Safford blood, and the Safford babies have always been lovely."

But Lady Louisa's natural curiosity was not to be put off by an ideal baby, whom old Mary had some difficulty in carrying away without further criticism of the crumpled Panama and green gauze pugaree.

"I am dying to hear the romance of your marriage," she said, "and what the family reasons were that

constrained you to keep it so long a secret even from those near and dear to you."

"My dear aunt, I want you to be very kind and not ask me any questions. There may come a time when I can feel pleasure in talking to you about my courtship and my marriage; but I am much too miserable to talk of happy things now. My husband is a wanderer in Central Africa; and I have heard alarming news about him. He may be dying—he may be dead—in the wilderness, among savages, while I am sitting here with you."

Lady Louisa was immediately subdued.

"My dearest girl, you cannot doubt my sympathy. We have both chosen men who are workers for God. My Wilfred panted and pined for a missionary's life; but he made the more heroic sacrifice of remaining at Shooter's Hill to be the staff and comfort of a widowed mother's declining years. She was stone deaf, which made conversation dreadfully wearying for him. Your husband and mine are kindred spirits, Claudia; even though Mr. Murray's birth may be more humble than Wilfred's, who is very well connected. Who would measure social differences in the lives of saints?"

Claudia allowed her aunt to run on. Lady Louisa's discourse was a voice in her ear, and nothing more. It was not till that amiable lady had run up and down the gamut of consolation, enthusiasm, piety, and affection, that her niece felt strong enough to inform her of the approaching journey to Uganda, a scheme which was unspeakably appalling to a person whose mind depicted the whole of Equatorial Africa as one seething mass of savages, mostly cannibals, dancing devil-dances and shooting poisoned arrows, on a waterless waste where lions prowled by day and night under a copper sky.

"My dear aunt, I shall be in no danger where I am going; and if I were to stay in England I should go out of my mind. I may do very little good in Africa, but I shall be nearer my husband, wherever he is."

She could hardly speak those last words, thinking

that the place of his abiding might be an unmarked grave in the wilderness—some never-to-be-found spot in the rank luxuriance of a tropical jungle, somewhere in the shadow of Ruwenzori.

"My poor darling, you ought not to have let him go back to Africa."

"No, I ought not to have let him go. But I did, you see! I hardened my heart against the pain of parting. Don't talk to me of my sorrow, Aunt Louisa. It is like a physical pain that throbs at every touch. Let us talk of my boy. I want you to be kind to him while I am away. God knows how long we may be parted. I have the utmost confidence in Mrs. Wilson, the trained nurse, and in my faithful Mary; but I shall always be thinking of perils, strange accidents—a chill, a fever, a run-away pony, a stray dog. What would not any mother fear, thousands of miles away from her son?"

On the subject of the boy Lady Louisa was all sympathy. She had always been fond of children in general; and Safford children were creatures of a superior kind, a distinct variety, if not a species. She assured Claudia that she would not let a day pass without seeing her darling nephew. She would walk beside his perambulator, and take him for drives in her victoria. She would exercise the utmost tact in her relations with Mrs. Wilson, certificated nurses being kittle cattle to deal with. And she would write to her dear Claudia by every mail, with a full account of the boy. After this assurance she allowed her niece to accompany her across the gardens and park to the Vicarage, with Chieftain and Rag skirmishing in their vicinity.

"I hardly like leaving you while you are so depressed," Lady Louisa said at parting.

"I am better alone—with my boy and the dogs. My troubles won't bear talking about."

"You were always too reserved, my love," said Lady Louisa, with a sigh.

She would have relished endless talk about her niece's affairs; how she had happened to fall in love with a missionary; the colour of his eyes and

hair; all the details of a romantic and clandestine marriage; and above all the division of the property, how much her uncle allowed her to retain, and how vast was his own share of the spoil.

"The fortune must be colossal," she told her husband, "or he would never have given up so much."

"Come, come, my dear Louie, we must not depreciate this good man's most exemplary conduct. It is very soothing to think that your income is not to be diminished, and that we can build our hothouse in time to make a show at Easter. I don't care about being patronised by retired shopkeepers with five hundred a year, just because they are able to grow a few arum lilies."

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE daily press of London was not slow to spread the news of Miss Rayner's romantic marriage, as published in the Skepton and Daneborough journals. Gushing paragraphs, with here and there a "leaderette," recorded the interesting fact. All comments were of a flattering nature, and the Reverend William Murray was exalted into a saint of the first magnitude; the notices of the marriage being followed from day to day with stray facts about the famous mission preacher, and anecdotal gossip about the Rayner family, with occasional allusions to the Saffords. One evening paper, indeed, gave the whole Safford pedigree—always with reference to Claudia's marriage—from the Baron Altrincham of the first Crusade, through fighting barons to diplomatic earls, down to the present peer, whose agricultural experiments and successes or failures on the turf were duly chronicled.

This liberal publicity brought Claudia a shower of letters, of congratulation, of astonishment, of delight, of remonstrance even, from friends, acquaintances, and relations, among these last, Lady Delabole in the major, and Lady Sedgefield in the minor degree, taking upon herself to admonish and to complain as only a near relation could or would.

The pleasantest of all the letters were those of the Barham girls, who were writing about a man they had known and admired scarcely short of idolatry.

"Never in my life have I been so astonished," wrote Patricia. "Of course I knew you admired and believed in him. Indeed, who could do otherwise, for, though he has not Fitzpatrick's fiery

eloquence and infinite variety, he is magnificent as an orator, a master-mind, a heart of gold. Never can I forget his goodness to our poor dears, though, strange to say, Mr. Fitzpatrick has made a deeper impression upon their foolish old minds. He has frightened them. That's why they worship him. How can I find words to tell you how fortunate I think you in having won the love of such a man—a love so unspeakably superior to the shallow feeling of the worms we meet in society, who may be kneeling at our feet to-day and in the Divorce Court for cruelty, desertion, and infidelity to-morrow. You have, indeed, chosen the better part, and your life ought to be all happiness. But what about your fortune, dearest Claudia? Well, if you have to give up every shilling, your loss will be of small account against such a pearl of price as William Murray's love.

"I called at the White House, longing to fling my arms round your neck and tell you all I think and feel about you; but as you are at Daneborough, I can only scribble this paltry letter."

Blanche wrote to the same effect, but with more spasmodic enthusiasm.

"When did you fall in love with him? Was it the first time you saw that splendid face radiant with inspiration in the light of the pulpit lamps? Was it his thrilling voice that subdued your soul, and made him a part of your being, even before he was introduced to you? Happy girl, to have subjugated that man of steel and fire! Never did I think that he could love any woman on earth, for I thought his passion for humanity had consumed all the forces of his heart and brain. How could a man who cared for *all*, ever concentrate his affection upon *one?*

"You have achieved a noble victory, and if by your marriage with that saint and hero you have forfeited your fortune, what is the worthless dross you lose compared with the gold you have gained?

"I knew you were *éprise*. I saw how you hung upon his words, how you flushed or paled when he addressed you. I saw your parted lips tremble. Yes, I knew that you loved him; but I never thought that you

could awaken the passion of a Romeo in that transcendental being, in whom the supreme power of mind seemed to have killed the common attributes of man.

"To love William Murray, and to be loved by him! I can conceive no more seraphic bliss, no more ideal existence."

After this enthusiasm came Lady Delabole's cold douche.

"You are really the most provoking girl I ever had to deal with. What on earth induced you to conceal your marriage, and make a ghastly scandal, if it was ever to be acknowledged? After all the hints and innuendoes I have had to pass unnoticed and as if unheard, and the prying questions I have had to parry, comes this thunderclap of a marriage two years ago, and a son a year old.

"I cannot trust myself to think of the unpleasant things that people are saying about you. Married two years ago? Where? And how could such a marriage be concealed all this time, when a prodigious fortune was at stake? Would not the uncle who was to get her money have been sharp enough to find out all about it within a week of the occurrence? Such things can never be hidden. Of course, there was no marriage two years ago; but there is a year-old son to be accounted for.

"That is the kind of thing that is being said about you, Claudia, more or less coarsely, the kind of thing that odious creature Treswick, whom my poor sister fed and fostered, has been circulating everywhere since he passed you on Susan Hilderness's motor. And now I conclude by this tardy confession you have reduced yourself from inordinate wealth to absolute penury. And what a choice you have made! A missionary! There is a commonness about the idea that disgusts me more than the rest of the story. There is nothing so petty to my mind as falling in love with a parson; not to be able to hear a telling sermon without wanting to marry the preacher. Your Aunt Louisa's marriage was a shock; but she was always feeble-minded, and I expected better things from you."

Aunt Sedgefield's letter was complaining, but somewhat kinder than the jobation of the greater lady. The dominant note was her ladyship's fear of the effect of this marriage upon her girl.

"In Dora's case it would not be a missionary, but a chauffeur."

Claudia threw the letters into her waste-paper basket, amongst the telegrams and congratulatory epistles of more distant friends.

Two days later there came other letters from the two aunts, and now tune and key was changed from a lugubrious largo to a chirping presto, from doleful minor to merry major.

"Louisa has told me about your uncle's exemplary conduct. I presume that *he* knew of your marriage from the first. I congratulate you on your good luck in keeping your two fine houses, with an adequate income. If Murray is presentable—which I conclude he is, or you wouldn't have married him—he ought to attain a brilliant position in our present state of society, where everything eccentric and out-of-the-way is run after. I hope he will drop his second-rate views about missionary work in Africa, and concentrate all his energies upon becoming a bishop."

Thus Lady Delabole, and with her Lady Sedgefield.

Letters from the cousins came by the same post—charmed at dear Claudia's romantic marriage, delighted that she was not going to be turned out of her lovely houses, longing to see her for a tremendous "yap," and pining for photographs of her husband and son.

"Of course, Mr. Murray is handsome. I can imagine the kind of man. A commanding presence, a man who sends a thrill round the church when he stands up in the pulpit. I take it for granted that he is tall."

Thus Lady Delabole's girl, in a masculine hand, with the greatest possible expenditure of ink and the thickest possible paper. Lady Sedgefield's girl wrote on a card adorned with her Christian name in violets, and with penmanship as minute as if the supreme

effort of her life had been to write the Lord's Prayer on a sixpence.

More stuff for the waste-paper basket!

Never for a moment in those quiet days at Danborough, walking over the hills with her dogs, the old familiar rambles, where every point of the far-reaching view seemed to be engraved upon her brain, or playing with her son in the gardens, never had that unknown land where men were seeking her husband been absent from her thoughts. She counted the hours till she should be on the ship that was to carry her to the place where sooner or later she was to find joy or desolation.

In five days the steamer was to leave Marseilles, and now it was in four days, and now it was the night before she was to start for London in the morning so as to cross the channel by the night boat. She had crept into the quiet room, where the shaded night-lamp glimmered on white curtains and satin coverlet, to take her last look at her boy, while the nurses were at supper in the day nursery, a door left half open, lest the child should wake. She knelt by the little bed, her lips pressed on the baby hand, the pink fingers curled into a ball like a flower, and prayed for the safety of her beloved in the days of severance. She would be far away—perhaps journeying on foot or carried by negro porters in wild regions remote from the possibility of telegraphic communication. She would be with the searchers, travelling over untrodden paths, and this child, who perhaps was all that Fate had left her, might sicken and slip out of life during her absence.

For some troubled moments, on her knees in the summer silence, she began to doubt whether she could leave him. But the moments of doubt were brief. She could be of little use to her son, in her ignorance and inexperience of infantine needs and dangers. She might be of little use in Central Africa, a helpless and even troublesome traveller. But she would at least be able to influence others, to urge the searchers to new efforts when their energies flagged, to carry on the search in spite of every discouragement; to

pour out her money, buying help from strangers whom only money could influence.

"It is a smaller thing to go to Uganda and join the friends who are looking for him than it was to go to him in his Edinburgh lodgings," she thought.

She was walking about her rooms till late into the night, unable to rest, and it was two o'clock when she fell asleep, worn out with unhappy thoughts, a sleep that was but semi-consciousness, disturbed by confused visions of places that were African and not African, strange mixtures of scenery she had known in Italy and scenery in Uganda that she had read about.

After some hours of this half-sleep that was more wearying than whole wakefulness, she sank at last into a deep slumber, from which she was awakened by the presence of Philomène standing at her bedside with something on a salver.

"The postmaster sent it up directly, madame, thinking it must be of great importance."

It was a cable message from the Mission House.

"Murray found, and being brought to Uganda; has been dangerously ill; will leave Mombasa by next Messageries steamer for Marseilles. Recovering from fever, weak and helpless; am going with him to the coast.—BURFORD."

He was coming to her. There was no need of an adventurous voyage. There was nothing that she could do for him, except to telegraph money and implore his friend to do all that the uttermost care could do to lessen the fatigue and the risk of the long and toilsome journey by the great lake and the Uganda railroad; a journey she had made her husband describe to her with all its pains and perils, in the placid hours when she loved to hear of Africa as a place to which he would never return. She knew the dangers of the lake; she knew the slow tortures of the railway; and she thought of her husband, weak and helpless, sick to death, perhaps dying before the end of the land journey, or carried on board the steamer at Mombasa,

a human wreck, to expire before the pale outline of a cloud-wrapt coast vanished into the blue.

* * * * * *

It was after six long melancholy days, during which Claudia had not left the precincts of Daneborough, that another cable message came.

"Murray carried on board Messageries steamer, Fleur-de-Lys, to-day; very weak, but hopeful; should arrive Marseilles eighteenth September."

This was the last news the cable had brought her. The lake and the railroad, with their unspeakable discomforts, had been suffered, and now on the steamer there would be rest and sea-air, tranquil hours that ought to bring healing and strength. The powerful frame that had never spared itself, the fine constitution that had never been weakened by self-indulgence, would have time to recover in the enforced idleness of a long voyage.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FLOWERS in piled-up baskets at every street corner, little troops of soldiers at quick march, flashing through the crowd, strings of mules moving slowly and dragging heavy loads, scarlet umbrellas, blue blouses, white caps, church bells, ship bells, mule bells, trumpets and drums, voices deep and strident, treble and shrill, movement without cessation, colour that dazzles the eye, noises that deafen the ear; or, in one word, La Cannebière, Marseilles, under the blinding September sun, in a light that makes opaque things seem translucent and dull things seem gay.

Claudia had driven through that confusion of movement and colour, hardly seeing anything. She was standing up in her carriage on the quay, waiting for the tender that was bringing the passengers from the Messageries steamer. She was watching the boat through her landscape glasses, straining her eyes in the search for one figure among the crowd on the deck, a crowd of excited men, women, and children, gesticulating with wild hands, waving frantic handkerchiefs, responsive to hands and handkerchiefs on the quay. She could not discover the face she was looking for in that confused and moving mass of Panama hats, pugarees and sun-umbrellas. Her heart, that had been beating wildly with glad expectation, seemed to stand still. A deadly cold, a sudden sickness, came over her, and she was nearly fainting.

What if he were not there? Not there, but in "his vast and wandering grave?"

They would come—the captain of the ship or the doctor, or a priest—to tell her how quietly he had drifted out of life, and how reverently they had com-

mitted his body to the deep; with what solemn prayer, with what promise of life eternal. They would give her his dying message, his last words of infinite love.

The glass dropped from her hand. She could look no more; the steamer was nearing the quay, but boat, water, ship, were spinning before her dazzled eyes. She could distinguish no single object in that blinding splendour of colour and light. She was alone in the hired carriage. She had insisted on coming alone to meet her husband, though Mary had implored her to take the Daneborough footman, or at least her courier maid. She would be "upset" at the meeting, Mary said; but she could suffer no witness of that meeting. She had brought her servants to Marseilles to be of use in future travel with her invalid husband, but in that crucial hour she must be alone.

She had no strength in her trembling hands to open the carriage door, but evil-visaged loafers, with hands like claws, were quick to help her, while the coachman sat unconcerned upon his box, looking at the ships and the crowd, too much absorbed by the scene to be interested in his fare.

She alighted somehow, almost in the arms of the mercenaries, and pushed her way through the crowd till she was in front of the gangway, watching each face and figure as it appeared in the vivid light, sharply defined against the blue sky—first women, women and children, and then a grey-haired old man, and then a priest, and another priest, and an ayah with young children, and the children's pallid mother, and then a procession of men, of all sorts and conditions, all ages, all nations, or seeming so to her despairing eyes.

No, he was not there. Surely he would have not been the last—not less eager than those other voyagers to meet the hand of a friend. Hope died in her heart. She stood staring at the gangway, paralysed with dread. Who were these? A priest again, helping the feeble steps of an elderly man, who walked with two sticks, and whose light-grey coat hung loose upon bent shoulders.

He had come back to her, the shattered wreck of

her honeymoon husband. The elderly man was William Murray. She gave a faint cry of gladness, and then the tears came in torrents.

"You have come back."

It was all she could say as he clasped her hand.

"My dearest love! Don't be frightened! I know that I am a miserable object, but there's life in the old dog yet."

He laughed and the priest laughed, and helped him to get into the shabby landau, where Claudia had put some down sofa pillows, and a bunch of stephanotis and roses on the front seat.

"Let me present you to my wife, Padre. She will be very grateful to you when she hears how good you have been to me," said Murray, and then to Claudia, "my kind friend is attached to the Roman Catholic Mission in Central Africa, and we have been fellow travellers from Mombasa—perhaps I ought to say we have been patient and nurse, for I have not been much good as a pal!"

"You have been so much good as to teach me modesty, since you have been strong enough to play chess, for you have always beaten me."

"I am at the Grand Hotel, monsieur, and I suppose my husband will stay there for a few days to rest. If you are in Marseilles I hope you will dine with us one evening."

"Madame is too kind, but, *helas!* I am going on to Avignon this afternoon. I have friends in the monastery there, with whom I am to stay till I go back to Africa."

"You will go back?"

"Yes, madame. I believe I shall take my last sleep in the shadow of Ruwenzori."

* * * * * *

It was late in the afternoon, and Murray had been lying on a sofa in the shadowy salon, where closed venetians shut out the sun, lying at rest after the excitement of the morning, when the effort of walking from the steamer to the tender and from the tender to the quay had been almost too much for him.

Claudia had been sitting beside him, with her head leaning against the pillow where his head, much greyer than when they parted, was lying.

Tired as he was, with the fatigue of extreme weakness, in which every bodily movement brings distress, he was able to talk, and to encourage his wife to talk to him. He had told her briefly of his peril in the pigmy forest, struck down with fever among those queer little people, unable to communicate with his friends even when he was in his senses, while for a long time he had been delirious, knowing neither where he was nor the people round him. The little people had been good to him after their lights; but it had needed all the force of an iron constitution to hold out against the medical treatment that witch-doctors had subjected him to while he was light-headed and unable to do battle with them, lying helpless upon a bed of fallen leaves. As consciousness gradually came back to him with the lessening of fever, he had taken his nurses in hand, and had found the little creatures kindly and affectionate, not without intelligence, and in some cases eager to be taught.

It was after a weary time of waiting, and by the exercise of infinite fortitude and perseverance, that he had been able to crawl to the nearest point where he could place himself in communication with Uganda, and where he could find some kind of comfort in the hut of a native king's headman. But even here he was remote from railway and telegraph; and it was only by the tardy progress of a native messenger that he could send an account of his condition to the Mission House. His friends there had lost no time in going to his assistance, but the journey was not easy for them, and his own journey to Mombasa had been a pilgrimage of pain.

"I rested for a few hours at Uganda, and there I saw all your messages, and knew that my beloved girl had done the thing that was right; and I prayed God to give me back to you, and I thought that the infinite Power that had been with me in the forest would let me live until I could hold your hand, as I am holding it now."

"You are not going to die, William; not till we have had a long life of happiness together. God might want to punish me, but He will not be hard upon you. No, no," as he tried to check her, "don't talk to me of the higher life, the better world we can only wonder and dream about. I want you here, here upon this lovely earth, in that divine Italy which I looked at with aching eyes, eyes tired out with tears, because you were not with me. Did you ever wonder why I stayed so long at Lerici?"

And then she told him in a low and broken voice of her son's birth; and, with her head nestling against his shoulder, her tears and kisses on his wasted hand, he could not speak words of blame.

"My foolish wife," he said softly, and that was the only reproach she ever had from him.

* * * * * *

A few days later they were at Grasse, in large, airy rooms on the ground floor of the hotel, with windows opening on a garden where they spent much more of their life than within four walls. An invalid carriage had brought Claudia's husband to this historic town among the hills and flower farms of Provence, where the air was full of the murmuring of fountains, where the scent of roses and jasmine blew round them on every wind, and where at this dead season they could have perfect quiet.

In this delicious garden Willie made his first familiar acquaintance with the sterner sex, in the person of his father, a new figure on the stage of life, which filled him with wonder and curiosity, for a long time known to his infantine mind only as someone who lay still and silent, and must not be troubled by uninvited attentions, a white worn face, a wasted frame always reclining on a sofa and having to be carried in and out of the house, or from one part of the garden to another, by the footman from Daneborough and a stalwart hall porter, a father who was too weak to talk much to him, and who could not so much as open and shut a gold watch for his amusement, and for whose service his own Nurse Wilson had almost deserted him,

leaving old Mary in undisputed possession of his chubby little person.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, the fitful pulse grew calmer, and the trembling hand began to shake less as it lifted cup or glass to parched and pallid lips. Slowly, by almost imperceptible degrees, as October brought the song of the vintagers from distant hills and the sun burned with a gentler fire, strength came back to a frame that had once seemed tougher than iron; but it was a long time before William Murray was able to visit the twelfth-century Gothic cathedral, and the old, old church of St. Sauveur, leaning on his wife's arm, and it was winter before he was well enough to make another journey with ease and comfort.

They went on to Bordighera at the beginning of the new year, and in April they were established at Claudia's old villa above quaint little Lerici, and there, in the garden and orchard on the hill, where her days had been spent in regretful memories of irrecoverable things, she was supremely happy with her husband and the little child who was the delight of his father's life. They spent a long summer among mountains and lakes, and a winter in Rome, and went back to England in the following spring, by which time Claudia's husband had become the William Murray of old, energetic, indefatigable, eager to be at work again in those dark places of the super-civilised city which were more dreadful than the mud-villages of Equatorial Africa, and where the devil men and women worship is not the invisible and impalpable demon of the untutored savage, but the very palpable devil of Gin.

EPILOGUE.

To the mind of Claudia's cousin Ruby, whose highest conception of earthly bliss had been the possession of the White House as a place wherein to "entertain" on a splendid scale, it seemed the irony of fate that the spacious rooms should serve for the most part for the assembling of men and women who did not know how to dress, or, in other words, did not devote all their brain-power to taking thought for their raiment; dowdy women and badly-groomed men, whose chief concern in life was to try to make other people's lives better. Committee meetings, hospital meetings, missionary meetings, temperance meetings, meetings of every kind that could serve the cause of philanthropy were held in the gallery where Lady Magdalen had stood for patient hours, superb in her beauty and exquisite in her attire, to murmur a few welcoming words to some of the greatest people and many of the smallest people in the world where one amuses one's self. The rooms were still magnificent, but a few fine pictures by minor painters of the Venetian School, a few large pieces of Oriental and German china, were the sole remaining evidences of Ralph Rayner's taste and lavish outlay as a collector. And the Mortlake tapestry, the Raffaelle and Rubens, the Greuze and Watteau, the Fragonards, the Turners, the *chef d'œuvres* of more recent art, the Sèvres and Meissen, Furstenberg, Berlin, Chelsea, Battersea, Swansea, Lowestoft, the gold snuff-boxes, the Cosway miniatures, the coloured prints after Morland, the Bartolozzis, the jade cups, the old Greek glass, iridescent, rainbow-hued, dug out of islands in the

Ionian Sea—where were all those treasures that Ralph Rayner had loved as if they had been living things?

Had they been sold at Christie's, and the price thereof given to the poor? That was the line of conduct society might naturally expect from the famous mission preacher, more famous than ever now he was the rich Miss Rayner's husband; but in this society was disappointed. Not one item in the two-hundred-page catalogue of art treasures that collectors coveted had been brought to the hammer; and yet the poor were to be richer for the famous Rayner collection, which was now a thing to gladden the eyes and improve the taste of every man, woman, and child in Skepton, that had a mind open to the cult of art and beauty.

There were handsome buildings in the town before the Rayner Museum was built on a hill in the middle of the People's Park, as fine a situation as that of the Greenwich Observatory, but the buildings erected by Ralph Rayner had been mostly utilitarian in scope and in design.

The museum that Claudia erected as the fittest monument for the man who had made Skepton what it was, had been built for beauty, and was the result of much thought on her own part and the counsel and help of famous artists in England and in Italy. As a thing of beauty, giving dignity to the umbrageous and picturesque park, the exterior was perfect; as a museum for the exhibition and classification of art treasures the interior was the admiration of experts from South Kensington and from the Louvre. Time, thought, and money can do much, and these had been given by Claudia and her husband without stint, and the Skepton people were proud of their museum. The troops of working men who had known and loved Ralph Rayner were never tired of showing excursionists from other industrial centres the marble tablet that told the origin of the building.

"In loving memory of Ralph Rayner, for whom from three to twelve thousand men and boys, in steadily increasing numbers, worked in health and

comfort for five-and-thirty years, and who in all those years never suffered from any trade dispute that could not be settled in amity, this museum is dedicated for ever to the people of Skepton, by his only brother, Mathew Rayner, and his only daughter, Claudia Murray."

Claudia had insisted upon associating her uncle in this dedication, since the treasures dedicated were really his gift, the *spolia opima* that the law would have allowed him.

* * * * * *

William Murray will never go back to Africa, unless he takes his wife with him, for they two have known the bitterness of parting, and will be companions to the end. Nor is he likely to conciliate Lady Delabole by becoming a bishop, since he holds no cure of souls. His parish is the world, and he is still the mission preacher whose magnetic personality won Claudia's heart. The dark places know him better than society, though the house in Park Lane does not shut its doors against well-dressed people. Claudia's musical parties are among the best of the season, and her singers and fiddlers like the gallery much better now the Mortlake tapestry and Beauvais curtains are gone. The jaundiced and the green-eyed say that William Murray has solved the insoluble problem, and has found out how to serve God and Mammon, since his work in the great Lancashire towns is relieved by intervals of rest at Daneborough, and his labours in Bermondsey or Whitechapel are lightened by all the amenities of modern civilisation, an exquisite wife, lovely children, and troops of friends, a large income one of the finest houses in London, and an ever-widening popularity as a pulpit orator.

On the outward aspect of the man as he stands up in some spacious church, and draws the lamp towards his open notebook, Equatorial Africa has left no trace beyond the iron-grey hair, and the dark-olive complexion ; but Claudia knows of his suffering when the old fever burns in the tired veins, and every limb is shaken by ague, fever generally followed by

neuralgic headaches which his doctor calls nerve-storms. Her hours of remorse are those that she spends sitting mute and sorrowful in a darkened room, her mind going back to the happy days at Grasmere, when the grey hairs were few, and pain had not drawn those deep lines upon the spacious forehead.

"I sent him back to Africa."

It is her punishment to repeat those words dumbly as she sits by his side in the darkness.

To-morrow perhaps he is well again, and they are happy again, ineffably content.

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